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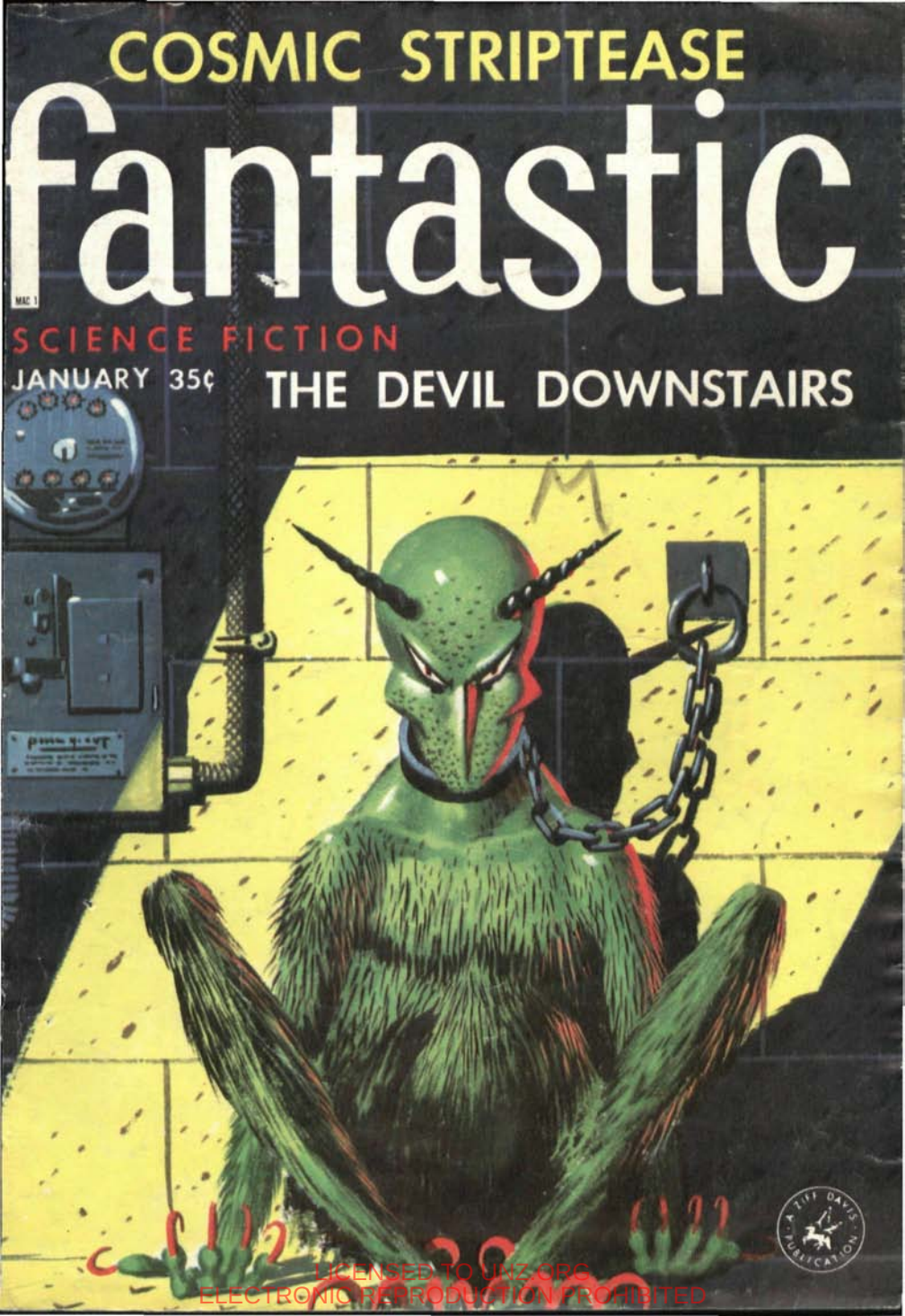

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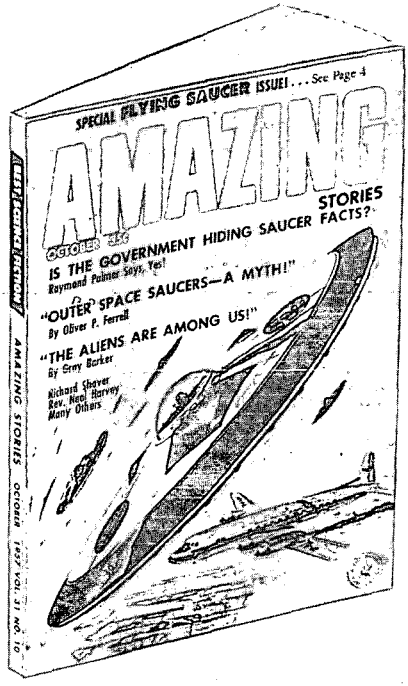
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Fantastic Is Going To Move—

—in new directions. How so? We're glad you asked because we're itching to tell you. It began, as such things often do, with a minor incident. An author friend dropped into the office not long ago, wearing as dark a case of the blues as we've ever seen.

"I just had a story bounced by" (he named one of the top slick magazines) "Didn't fit their format."

"Too bad."

"I worked my heart out on the thing. And they said it was one of the best stories they'd ever read."

"I'd like to read it."

"Okay—I'll send it over." And he slouched out.

We read the story later and conceded that the big slick editor was right. It was one of the best we'd ever read, too. Then we remembered the fatal words. *It didn't fit their format.*

After classifying the slick editor as a stupid ass, we suddenly did an about-face and looked at facts. Stupid or not, he had plenty of fellow-asses and not the least of these—the editor of *Fantastic.* So we asked ourself:

How many great stories have you turned down over the years because they "didn't fit your format?" Plenty. How many less-excellent stories have you published because they conformed to a rigid structure you previously set up? Too many for comfort. How many times have you told an author: "Look, chum—I want a great story from you—the best you ever wrote. Of course it's got to be thus and so; it's got to do this and that; it's got to go from here to there—otherwise it won't fit my format."

So, in a broad sense authors have not been writing for their readers, but for the editors who stand between—for the Keep-

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fantastic

JANUARY 1958

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Editor
PAUL W. FAIRMAN

Managing Editor
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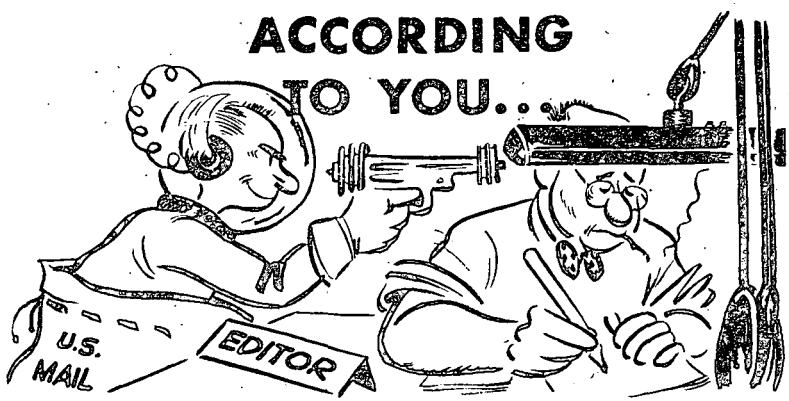

BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

I believe that you downgrade your readers in your method of solving the piston problem. This is an interesting problem but your answer is not only uninteresting, it is didactic, confining, discourages initiative and is based on archaic methods of pre-defined solution and physical concept. This is not fair to your many young readers who will become our scientific iconoclasts. It is offensive to us oldsters who pin our hopes upon them . . .

Yet, you picked a fascinating problem. Considering that there is a moment when the piston is going up, followed by a moment when the piston is going down, we are confronted by a paradox. "Up" and "down" do not have continuity. Some of the possibilities which this introduces have been expressed. Some are in the theory of discontinuity which is now stumbling toward a distant bright future with the pathway now lightened by findings such as the corroboration of quantum mechanics. However, we are not even certain that the piston problem has discontinuity as such. If there may be another "moment" between that of "up" and that of "down," what are the contents of this moment? Does it involve continuity? Does it involve direction? No justice is served by postulating that there is no interim between up and down unless you can prove it.

Suppose that instead of the piston possessing direction—that a direction is a continuum in itself. This makes "up" and "down" two different continua with the piston traveling first in one and then in the other. Hence the moment of change is the one in which the piston "slips" from one continuum to the other. Here is a potentially highly productive area of which we are quite ignorant.

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THE DEVIL DOWNSTAIRS

By P. F. COSTELLO

This was the Devil's boast: "Without me, you mortals would be in trouble. Your whole world would go to hell!" And he proved his point. Before long the world was crying: "Come back, Lucifer! All is forgiven!"

JOE! There's a burglar in the house!"

Joe Emerald grunted and pulled the sheets over his head. "Lemme sleep," he muttered.

"Wake up, Joe!" This time his wife's fingers dug into his shoulder. "I tell you, somebody's in the house! For heaven's sake, wake up!"

"Let him," mumbled Joe again. "What d'ya want me to do, get up and make him a cup of coffee? Go to sleep, Pearl, there's nobody . . ." He began to snore.

Out in the living room, a lamp fell to the floor with a crash. Joe sat erect, startled,

Beautiful women were

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Satan's main weapon. They made sin look so attractive.

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awake. "Whassat!" he exclaimed.

"I *told* you there was a burglar in the house," said Pearl.

"In a private dick's nouse?" asked Joe. "And what could he find here—except bills?"

"He could be a kidnapper!" said his wife in a frantic whisper. "Joe, please get your gun and go out there, before I do it myself!"

A door opened somewhere in the house.

"He's going into the children's bedroom!" gasped Pearl. "Oh, Joe . . ." She leaped from bed, fumbled for her bathrobe.

"Stay right here!" said Joe, almost savagely. He was out of bed now, and his fingers closed around his gun in its shoulder holster hanging over the chair. He opened the bedroom door, stepped out into the darkness of the living room beyond. A few quick steps took him to the door of the children's room, which was closed. He laid a hand on the knob, then whirled swiftly as a door shut softly somewhere at the rear of the house.

"Basement door," he muttered. "He's going down in the basement; must have heard Pearl yakking. Well, he won't get out that way!"

He made his way swiftly to the kitchen, halted an instant at the basement door. Beyond it he heard a queer scurrying, clicking noise. Then silence.

The basement had no outlet other than the door at which he stood, and the windows were merely glass blocks set into the concrete wall, and did not open, except for small ventilators built into them. Whoever was down there would have to come up this stairway if he intended to leave the house. But Joe did not intend to let him leave.

He opened the door, slid his hand inside in the darkness, flicked on the light switch. The basement was instantly flooded with brilliant light from the hundred-watt bulbs Joe had put in. Up at the head of the stairs it was less glaring to Joe's eyes than it must have been to the intruder. He had an advantage, and he followed it up quickly. He leaped down the stairway, halfway, and brandished his gun. "Put 'em up!" he snarled. "Don't make a move, or I'll put lead in your liver!"

There was no sound.

Slowly Joe advanced down the stairs, crouching to get as early a view as possible of the entire basement, until his head came below the floor joists. Nothing was in sight,

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but he heard a slight sound behind the oil burner, which was the only place in the basement beyond view.

"Okay," he said. "You're behind the oil burner. Just step out with your hands up, and don't make any false moves. And don't think you can pot me—I'm the best pistol shot in this state, bar none. When Joe Emerald shoots at something, he hits it."

There was no answer. Cautiously Joe stepped down the last two steps to the concrete floor, then walked toward the oil burner's square bulk. He aproached it from the end that offered the widest passage between it and the wall, eyes alert for the slightest sign of a protruding gun. But there was nothing.

He took the last step that gave him a clear view of the space behind the burner and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Oh, my beer-guzzling aunt!"

"A commendable habit, if done to sufficient excess," said a deep, hoarse, almost animal-like voice.

Joe Emerald stared at the creature confronting him, and the creature stared back.

"The devil!" he gasped.

"Are you swearing, or simply making an observation?" asked the hairy creature, eyeing him intently with its slanted, lidless eyes.

Joe swallowed hard. "You are *green!*" he said, in startled tones.

"So you're *observing,*" said the creature in disappointment. "Yes, I'm green. What of it?"

"I'd rather expected you to be red."

"And with a forked tail?"

Joe looked closely. "You haven't one, have you?"

"No. I never had. The whole thing is an ecclesiastical calumny."

"A what?"

"A dirty lie."

"You should talk!" exclaimed Joe.

"You don't seem to question my identity," observed the creature. "Most people think the devil is human. Merely a case of identifying themselves with a superior being, I assure you."

"If you're so superior, what are you doing in my basement?"

"I came down here to direct a crime wave—the most ambitious I've attempted in years. This is a very corrupt town, you know."

"How right you are," agreed Joe. "But why from *my* basement?"

"What better place than the

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home of a private detective? I always like to have the law on my side, and it usually is."

"What makes you think I'd be on your side?"

The Devil grinned. Joe almost dropped his gun. It was hardly a face adaptable to grinning. The resulting grimace was only recognizable as such with the aid of a sort of sixth sense. The intended humor came through, but the physical aspect was soul-shaking.

"Ever hear of possession?" he asked.

Joe stiffened, gripped his gun tighter. "Don't make a move!" he warned.

"I won't need to," the Devil assured him. "I do it all with hypnotism. In a few minutes you will walk back up those stairs, just as you came down them, and tell your wife what she heard was only a cat, and that you put it out. She won't suspect that *you* are still in the basement, temporarily occupying my body, while the man returning to the delights of his wedded chamber is a being truly capable of utilizing her particular talents to the greatest advantage. She may wonder at your sudden virility, but I believe she will be rather pleased, if not delighted."

The Devil sniffed. "By the way, do you own a dog?"

"Not now. Used to have a police dog, but my wife made me get rid of it—too savage with kids around, she said. I used to keep it chained down here."

"Oh, excellent," said the Devil. "I see the chain now, fastened to the wall. Must have been a big devil. Ideal! A collar and all. Will be handy to see that you don't walk off with my body while I'm using yours."

He turned his slant eyes on Joe's and stared.

It was Joe's turn to grin. He did so crookedly. "Won't work," he said. "I'm not suggestible. Can't be hypnotized, in other words. Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'm not disappointed," said the Devil. "Very interested! You are rather unusual."

"So, what now with the possession business?"

The Devil shrugged. "I'll have to resort to an old standby."

"And what's that?"

"Force. Tried and true, my most effective method. All through the ages I've used force. Great conquerors have done my work merely by force of arms. More lately I've preferred intrigue, cold war

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stuff, you know, but since you are from the old school, I'll just have to overpower you."

The Devil advanced slowly, flexing his hairy arms and going into a crouch, almost ludicrously reminiscent of a boxer's stance.

Deliberately Joe leveled his gun and pulled the trigger. The blast was deafening in the close confines of the basement, but the Devil didn't waver. He grinned his horrible grin once more and pointed to a flattened piece of lead on the floor. "Neat trick, don't you think?" he asked. "If I were vulnerable to bullets, I'd have been holed rather frequently. Even silver bullets, silly superstition, are of no avail. Put up your dukes, my friend. I'm going to slap you silly."

The door at the head of the stairs opened, and Pearl's voice rang through the basement. "Joe! Joe, are you all right!"

"Don't come down!" yelled Joe. "I've got the Devil cornered down here."

"Cornered!" exclaimed the Devil. "Why you grandstander, you! Even while facing me, you can blow your horn to your wife! What a phony. Maybe it's time she got a real break. . . ."

Joe Emerald threw his gun carefully and swiftly through the air, and as the Devil ducked it neatly, he hurled his six-foot-one of well-trained muscle and bone at the hairy figure. They came together with a crash, and for an instant the Devil reeled back.

"If it's force you want," snarled Joe, "maybe I'm not unversed in its application. Ever seen any jiu jitsu?"

"Invented it," said the Devil, evading a hold, and applying one of his own. Joe whirled through the air and went to the concrete floor with a crash. But he was up in an instant, his hurtling body cracked into the Devil's knees, and both went down in a heap. In an instant they were thrashing around in a violent tangle of arms and and legs. Joe crashed a fist home into the Devil's midsection, and the Devil grunted. Then a back-handed slap from the Devil's hand rattled the teeth in Joe's skull. Brilliant lights danced before his eyes. Instantly the Devil threw his hairy body atop Joe's and bore him back, both shoulders flat against the floor. A taloned claw gripped his throat, and began to squeeze. Joe thrashed around, but he could not throw off the Devil's weight, which seemed

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to increase immensely by the second.

"Great help, the knowledge of how to increase gravity," observed the Devil, tightening his grasp on Joe's throat. "As soon as consciousness leaves you, I'll make the transference, and then we'll chain you by your own dog's collar and leave you here."

Joe Emerald thrashed wildly, but the lights in the basement began to grow dim as his wind was cut off. Despair swept over him in a wave as black as the approaching unconsciousness.

There was a dull thud, a groan, and the grip on his throat lessened, fell away altogether. In a whirling haze of black, he heard a mumble, "Women . . . always bruising my head. . . ."

Then Pearl was bending over him, sobbing, lifting him, shaking him wildly.

"Get up, Joe!" she begged. "Please get up. I've knocked him out with the snow shovel."

Joe shook his head to clear it, and the lights seemed to come back on. He climbed to his feet, stood wavering as he stared about. Pearl was clinging to him, staring down at the floor. He looked down. The Devil was lying flat on his stomach, and across him lay the snow shovel with which Pearl had hit him. There was a goose-egg on the back of the Devil's bald head, and it was getting bigger by the second.

"You really walloped him hard!" exclaimed Joe.

"We've got to get out of here!" said Pearl. "Get the kids and go! He'll come to pretty soon and then . . ." she began to shudder uncontrollably. "He's the Devil!" she sobbed.

"I guess he is," admitted Joe. "But it won't do any good to run from him. Has never helped in the past."

His eyes roved about the basement, fell upon the chain fastened to the wall, with its steel collar.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "We'll chain him to the wall with Rover's chain. That'll give us time to decide what to do."

He grabbed the Devil by the heels, dragged him over to the wall. Opening the collar, he placed it around the Devil's thick neck, and snapped it shut. It clicked with a satisfying air of finality. Joe jerked it several times to see that it was tight.

"He's coming to!" exclaimed Pearl.

"And I think the kids have heard the commotion and are coming to investigate," said

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Joe. "You get upstairs—head them off. We can't let them see this . . ."

Pearl ran for the stairs, and called up to them. "No, Jimmy — Sally, don't come down! Mother's coming up. Everything's all right."

The sleepy sound of the children's voices came to Joe's ears as she disappeared up the stairs, and they were cut off suddenly as she shut the door. He could hear the sound of their feet on the floor above as she marshalled them back to their beds.

Beside him the Devil stirred. "Ow," he groaned. "What was it she hit me with?"

"A snow shovel."

"Never had any use for snow shovels," said the Devil, struggling to a sitting position. The chain around his neck rattled and his eyes widened. He looked at the chain, and at the bolt that held it into the wall. He took the chain in both hands.

"Never saw a chiseling contractor's cement I couldn't pull a bolt out of," he said.

Joe picked up the snow shovel and stood watchfully waiting. The Devil tugged at the bolt, then yanked furiously. At length he leaned back against the wall, breathing heavily.

"No cheap contractor put that in," said Joe. "I did it myself."

"What were you building, a fortification?" snarled the Devil.

"Just made up my mind there wasn't going to be any plaster cracking in this house," said Joe.

"It doesn't seem that it will," said the Devil. "But never mind, it won't make any difference in the long run. If there's anything I've got lots of, it's time. I'll figure out a way to get out of here. Meantime I'd advise you to stay out of my reach. And don't think that shovel would help you—it's only women who can put dents in my noggin. And your wife won't get a second chance—the woman doesn't live whom I can't hypnotize in one second."

"Thanks for telling me," said Joe. "I'll see that she stays out of the basement."

"Why don't you go back to bed," advised the Devil. "I've got to think about this situation."

"Go back to bed?"

"What else can you do?" asked the Devil.

Joe thought a minute. "Nothing," he agreed finally. "But it seems to me that you are in the same boat. You can't loose yourself from that

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chain, and as long as I keep people out of the basement, your presence here will be a secret. Okay, you think about it, and I'll go upstairs and do the same. Seems to me that this thing can be turned to good, somehow."

"While I'm down here you can't do much else," said the Devil dourly. "But it can't last — it never has. This concrete will disintegrate finally . . ."

Joe Emerald stared at the Devil a moment, then turned and went thoughtfully up the stairs. At the top, he flicked the switch and the basement went dark. Peering down, he could see only two balefully glowing yellow orbs, slanted and evil, shining in the darkness.

He opened the cellar door, stepped into the room above and closed the door behind him. Pearl stood in the doorway of the living room, staring anxiously at him. He looked at her a moment, and suddenly he grinned.

"Pearl," he said. "We've got the Devil downstairs, chained to the wall!"

"Oh, Joe," she said with a wail. "What are we going to do?"

He walked over and took her in his arms and kissed her. "It's not what we're going to do," he said. "What's *he* going to do?"

She stared up at him. "What *can* he do?"

"Nothing, so far as I can see," said Joe. "As long as nobody goes near him, he's helpless." His eyes lit up. "Maybe this is the beginning of that thousand years the Bible says he's to be chained!"

"Here, in *our* basement?" asked Pearl.

"Why not? He's down there right now, isn't he?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly.

"Well, can you think of any reason why he shouldn't stay there?"

"No," she said, but there was doubt in her voice.

As the weeks passed, her doubt began to fade. It began to become increasingly evident that the Devil couldn't break the chain that held him, and he had even ceased rattling it. Joe had nailed the basement door shut so the kids couldn't open it, and had promised them a spanking if they tried. Strangely enough, they had accepted the warning without comment, and had, indeed, behaved like little angels. Neither of them had even approached the door. As a matter of fact, they had been a source of constant surprise because of

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their good behavior in all respects. There hadn't even been a quarrel over toys.

"What's the matter with the kids?" asked Joe one night.

"Why, nothing," said Pearl. "They've been just as happy and contented as they can be."

"Aren't they a little too happy and contented?"

Pearl looked at him sharply. "Of course not. How can they be too happy?"

"I think they are. When's the last time Jimmy has complained about Sally kicking him?"

"I . . ." Pearl hesitated. "Sally hasn't been kicking him. So why should he complain?"

"Why hasn't Sally been kicking him?"

"Joe, what on earth's the matter with you? Do you *want* Sally to kick him?"

"Of course not. But the point is, she hasn't."

"Not much of a point," said Pearl. "I think it's natural she should outgrow it."

"Have you been listening to the news reports?" asked Joe.

"Certainly. I have the television on at noon every day. Richard Z. Hardlett gives the complete news every day."

"Okay, what's been happening?"

"Not much of anything. Just things like the National Association of Church Socials is holding a big social in Washington, and the President's going to attend. . . ."

"Kind of exciting, eh?"

"Not very."

"No murders, no robberies, no sex crimes, no Jack-the-Rippers, no embezzlings, no politicians stirring up trouble in Syria so they can raise the price of American gasoline?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm driving at another point," said Joe. "The second point is that the world's kind of peaceful all of a sudden—some change!"

Pearl looked at him, then her eyes lit up. "Of course!" she exclaimed.

"Of course what?"

"It's the Devil. He's chained up in our basement, and he can't go around stirring up trouble! *That's* why there isn't any crime going on! Crime has taken a holiday while the Devil is chained up. Oh, Joe, isn't it wonderful!"

"Yes," said Joe. "It's wonderful. If it gets much more wonderful, I don't see how we're going to pay our bills."

"Pay our bills?"

"Yes. I haven't made a dime in two weeks! Not one single client has come into my office since the night we

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chained old Beelzebub to the basement wall."

Pearl looked thoughtful. "Do you really think that he can't do any mischief while he's chained up? It doesn't seem to me that he's always been present at the scene of every crime. How could he be? Why, he'd have to be in a million places at once."

Joe shrugged. "I used to think that he did it all with a sort of world-wide influence. Something like a powerful mental wave that suggested all sorts of evil things to susceptible people—which is almost everybody."

"Or maybe he has his imps to carry out his orders—and they can't get to him now to get their usual briefing."

"Seen any imps around the house?" asked Joe.

She shook her head. "No. And even at night, when you have been at the office, I've not felt alarmed at the possibility of a prowler. I've had a sort of confidence that there wouldn't be any. I do believe it's true—the Devil is completely helpless to spread his evil influence outside our basement."

"I guess you're right," admitted Joe. "I've felt the same thing—that feeling of there being nothing to worry about. I even trust the other guy when he's coming up behind me on the road, not to try to pass on a hill or a curve. He doesn't even blow his horn when you miss the red light changing to green. Everything's sweetness and light."

"Well," said Pearl, "there's only one answer that I can see."

"What's that?"

"You'll just have to get another job. If you're not to get any more clients, you might as well quit being a private detective and look for something else to do."

"I'll *have* to," said Joe. "Our bank account won't last that long if we have to tap it each month for all our living expenses, that's sure! And we've got to keep up our payments on the mortgage, or we'll lose the house."

"We can't let that happen!" exclaimed Pearl. "If anybody ever goes down in that basement, the Devil will be loose again, and he'll be awful mad. The world would take a real beating. . . ."

"I rather suspect he'd go hog-wild for a time," Joe agreed. "And he'd probably want to take it all out on us. Revenge would be his first thought."

"Then you've *got* to get another job. Right away. We

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don't want to miss a single payment!"

"Nor any meals," said Joe. "Which reminds me, I wonder if the Devil ever gets hungry?"

"I never thought of it," confessed Pearl, a slight expression of contrition crossing her features. "The idea of the Devil eating is just something that I've never considered, nor knew anybody who did consider it."

"I don't believe he eats," said Joe. "Why should he need food? He's immortal."

"I'd hate to think of him starving down there," said Pearl hesitantly.

"Don't you even begin to think he might!" said Joe in sudden alarm. "He doesn't eat, that's all there is to it. Even if he did, it would be just for pleasure—and it won't hurt him to go without. Besides, it would be the best thing that ever happened on this old world if he *did* starve to death."

"Don't worry," said Pearl. "I couldn't go down in that basement for love or money!"

Joe looked at her sharply. "You'd better not—for either of them!" he said. "I'll do the loving around here, and I'll make the money!"

The sound of running feet interrupted him, and he turned to the door to see Jimmy and Sally coming in from their play. Their faces were flushed, shining with exertion and health.

"Daddy," said Sally. "Will you read us a fairy-story before supper?"

Joe lifted her in his arms and held her high with a grin. "Sure thing, little girl," he said. "Come on into the parlor, Jimmy, and we'll rattle one off."

"I'll get the book," said Jimmy, racing for the bookcase.

Joe seated himself on the easy chair and plumped Sally down beside him. He took the book from Jimmy and made room for the boy opposite Sally. He opened the book and read the title.

"Pandora's Box," he said. "The story of the little girl whose curiosity loosed all the troubles upon the wor . . ." He stopped suddenly and looked toward the kitchen where Pearl was rattling dishes preparing the supper.

"What's the matter, Daddy?" asked Jimmy. "Why don't you read the story?"

Joe looked down at him. "I will," he said. "But I hope you realize this is only a fairy-tale, and didn't really happen?"

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"The man on the television said it did," protested Jimmy.

"On the television?"

"Yes. He said it was almost like somebody had closed Pandora's box, the way things were going in the world these days. And how could anybody close the box if it wasn't real?"

"Is that why you got me this book to read?" asked Joe.

"Sure. Now read it, Daddy. I want to know about Pandora's box, and how she opened it, and what happened."

"It shouldn't happen to a dog," said Joe, "then—or now." He glanced once more toward the kitchen. Then he began to read, but as he read, a gnawing worry began to creep through his mind.

There was a Devil downstairs, and once before a woman had loosed him.

The next evening Pearl greeted him at the door with excitement. "Did you hear the news?" she asked.

Joe looked alarmed. "He hasn't escaped?" he demanded.

"The Devil? No. Not a sound out of him. It's got everybody excited. The newscasters have been giving it a big coverage."

"What's got everybody excited, and who's covering who?"

"The disarmament agreement! The United States and Russia have agreed to scrap all armaments, disarm all the atom bombs, stop making them, and put in a foolproof system of inspection that will make it impossible for anybody in the world to make another atom bomb, or a missile, or even a bomber. Isn't it wonderful!"

"Sure is," agreed Joe. "But maybe it's just another Russian agreement. When the chips are down, they'll probably claim they never said any such thing."

"No! They've submitted plans and maps of all their atomic installations, their stockpiles, plans and details of their intercontinental ballistics missile, everything. The United States is going to do the same thing. . . ."

Joe looked incredulous. "You mean the Russians *voluntarily* instituted this whole thing, and actually delivered the information. . . ?"

"Yes. A team of scientists, diplomats and military men selected by the U. N. flew in, and the Russians showed them everything. Russian scientists, statesmen and military men are already on their way here to inspect our installations."

"It looks like, with the

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Devil tied up downstairs, this old world is headed for peace at last," said Joe.

"I'm so happy!" exclaimed Pearl. She looked at Joe closely. "Aren't you?"

He nodded. "Of course. But I'm a little worried, that's all."

"About what?"

"Finding a job isn't going to be easy. I'll bet I tried every plant in town today, and at every one, the story's the same. They aren't hiring—in fact, they are laying men off."

"Laying them off?"

"Yes. As one personnel man put it: 'The men are working like beavers—every one of them putting in an honest day's labor. We're over-producing like mad.' The Union fined twelve bricklayers today for laying more than ninety-six bricks an hour."

"You'll find something tomorrow," Pearl said reassuredly.

"I've got to go to the bank first," said Joe. "Tomorrow's mortgage payment day. Just how much do we have in the bank?"

"About seven hundred dollars," said Pearl.

"Enough to last us for three months, if we scrimp," said Joe.

Pearl looked shocked. "You will find a job before *that!*" she exclaimed positively.

The day Joe paid the second mortgage payment out of savings deposit funds, she was forced to admit that he might not.

"Romburg - Smith closed down today," Joe reported wearily. "The army cancelled their jet motor contract. Twenty-two million dollars worth. All in all, the army's cancelled sixteen billion dollars worth of contracts in the last thirty days. The President's estimate of unemployment today is up to twenty-eight million. There were food riots in Indianapolis. . . ."

"Food *riots!*" exclaimed Pearl. "You mean fighting, violence?"

"No, not exactly," admitted Joe. "The newspapers called it a riot, because they're desperate for news, these days, and anything at all that will give them an excuse for some sensational adjectives for the headlines, they'll jump on. As a matter of fact, it was just a mass-meeting to request federal aid held in the courthouse square. There were signs reading 'Give us jobs, or give us food.' All very orderly and politely. But I keep thinking that hunger is a very primitive instinct, and I keep

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thinking of the Devil downstairs, and what he'd have to say about it."

"You *know* what he'd say about it," said Pearl. "He'd suggest that they steal food."

"Well," said Joe, "when they get hungry enough, what *will* they do? It's just possible they won't need the Devil to suggest anything."

"But that's impossible," said Pearl, wide-eyed. "The Devil's responsible for all such things. With him out of action, people would never think of crime."

"Wouldn't they?" asked Joe. "Is it a crime to eat?"

"No . . ." Pearl hesitated. "I guess it isn't. And I think if it got to the point where I couldn't put a meal on the table for Jimmy and Sally, I'd probably put a different interpretation on borrowing a few potatoes from old MacDonald's potato field."

"I wonder if the Devil's reputation is entirely deserved?" said Joe. "He's chained up in our basement, but the situation that's building up in the world is becoming explosive."

"Maybe he's not as helpless as we think," ventured Pearl. "Maybe he *can* control things mentally, even from down there in the basement?"

Joe shook his head.

"Why are you so sure?" asked Pearl.

"Something he said to me down in the basement."

"What was that?"

"When he told me to go upstairs and go to bed—he mentioned something about not being able to do anything but good while he was down there."

"Who, the Devil?"

"No, me. He said I'd not be able to do much else, when I said maybe this thing could be turned to good, somehow. He seemed pretty certain that I didn't have much choice in the matter."

"Well, then, what are you worried about?"

"I'm worried because it has occurred to me that the Old Boy has always been an egotist. Maybe he's not the bigshot he thinks he is, controlling all the evil in the world. Maybe he hasn't got a monopoly, and never had."

"I don't believe it," said Pearl. "The Bible says Satan is the author of all evil."

"Maybe you're right," said Joe. "And if you are, and he should get loose with the world in the potentially dangerous position it now occupies, all hell could break loose."

"By the way," said Pearl.

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"The meter man is coming again tomorrow."

"The meter man?" asked Joe blankly.

"Yes. He'll want to read the meter. . . ."

Joe clapped his hand to his head. "It's in the basement!" he exclaimed. "How come he didn't ask to read it last month!"

"I told him we were fumigating the basement for termites," said Pearl. "So he said he'd make our reading out for the same amount of power we used the month before. But what'll I tell him this time?"

"Tell him we're fumigating again—that the first time didn't take! He can't go down into that basement!"

"All right. But what'll I tell him the third time?"

"That's a good question. But maybe by that time he won't need to go into the basement."

"Why won't he?"

"Because I haven't paid the bill for two months. One more and they'll cut us off at the pole."

"Then you'd better not pay the bill," said Pearl.

"Are you asking me to cheat the electric company?" asked Joe.

Pearl looked startled. Then she smiled. "No. I'm asking you not to let the Devil have a chance to get loose. Certainly *that's* not a crime."

"From the Devil's viewpoint, maybe. But it isn't from mine. Anything as dangerous as he is, should be locked up. I don't think there is a jury in the world that would disagree with me in that respect."

The next day, impossible as it seemed, all hell did break loose. Joe Emerald was waiting in line with a hundred other men to check with the unemployment bureau. One of the men had a portable radio, and although he had it tuned so low that only he could hear it, his shout was something everybody could hear.

"The President!" he choked. "Somebody's shot the President!"

He turned up the volume, and for a few stunned moments Joe listened to the excited voice of the announcer blurting out a complete lack of details other than a variety of ways of expressing the single detail that he did have—that the President had been shot.

"That's a crime!" he exclaimed, and the man next to him blinked.

"What else?" he snorted. "What are you, a Democrat?"

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"Pearl!" exclaimed Joe. "She's let him loose!"

The man beside him frowned. "A nut . . ." he began, then sidled away. But now Joe whirled and ran from the building. There was only one thought in his mind. A crime had been committed, and it could only mean one thing—the Devil was loose!

Within ten minutes he raced up the steps to his own front door and hurled it open. In the living room he almost ran into Pearl, who uttered a low cry of alarm.

"Joe! What's wrong!"

"The Devil!" shouted Joe. "He's loose!"

"Why, Joe, whatever are you talking about. He's not loose. The door's nailed tight, just like it has been for two months. And besides, I've been hearing him down there all morning."

Joe ran into the kitchen, inspected the door. It was intact, and so were the nails. He ran out of the house and peered through the glass bricks of the basement windows, but could see nothing because of the wavy pattern in them that permitted only light, but not vision through them.

He came back into the house.

"What's wrong, Joe?" asked Pearl, her face pale.

"The President's been assassinated and that's what's wrong," said Joe heavily. "And if that isn't a crime, what is?"

Pearl ran to the television and turned it on. In a moment they were listening to almost hysterical voices, and watching equally hysterical scenes, as television cameras wheeled into position in the nation's capital and took shots of milling throngs, and announcers interviewed individuals who gave varied incoherent statements and expressions of grief that were obviously inspired only by the desire to be on television.

Abruptly the scene switched to a newscaster in the newsroom of the network, and a more calm voice was giving a coherent, though tense account of world news.

"Even as the President fell before an assassin's bullet," he was saying, "violence is flaring in all parts of the world. In Barcelona a mad mass of rioters is looting the city, led by rebel army factions who have taken over the arsenal and established a new government. The trouble seems to have broken out with unbelievable swiftness, and already the U. S. Air Base has been attacked and it has been

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reported that some fighting is actually going on. Air Force property will be defended, according to a Pentagon spokesman, in spite of the possibility of a rift with the government of the country, although just who is the government at this moment cannot be said with any certainty.

"In Algiers, all communications have been cut off, but it is reported that French citizens are being murdered wholesale in a ghastly blood bath.

"In Paris, gangs of looters are battling police, and similar scenes are being enacted in a dozen other European cities.

"But here in America there is a sort of a stunned silence and inactivity as the nation learns of the murder of the President. No one seems to know who fired the shot, but there is a growing rumor that it was a senator who performed the deed. Impossible as it seems, there were five senators in the White House at the time, and none of them can be located now, in the confusion that has engulfed the home of the President. No one seems to know which five they were. . . ."

The scene switched once more to a camera near the White House and incoherence reigned supreme.

"*That's* covering the news?" snorted Joe. "But what's that you were saying before about hearing noises all morning from the basement? I thought the Devil had been quiet as a mouse for weeks?"

"He has. And that's exactly what he sounds like now," Pearl said.

"You're being very lucid," said Joe. "What exactly does he sound like now?"

"A mouse," said Pearl. "A great big mouse. He's been squeaking all morning, and his claws keep clicking on the floor as though he were doing the St. Vitus Dance."

Joe frowned. Then he went into the bedroom. When he came out, he had his gun.

"What are you going to do?" asked Pearl in alarm.

"Where's the hammer?"

"In the kitchen in the knife drawer. Why?"

"I'm going to go down and see if the Devil's still securely chained. Maybe he's working loose."

"Be careful," she said. "If he has, he might be waiting for you to pull those nails out."

"You grab the snow shovel, and stand behind me waiting. If he *is* loose, close your eyes and swing. Don't look into

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his eyes under any circumstances."

Pearl went into the broom closet and got the snow shovel. She stationed herself in readiness while Joe pulled the nails. They squeaked protestingly, and from down in the basement came an answering squeak.

"That *does* sound like a mouse," said Joe. "Been doing that all morning?"

"Yes."

"From the sound of it, he's still chained," said Joe. "Hear that chain rattle?"

"Maybe he's just doing it to fool you. When you get close . . ."

"I'm not going to get close enough for him to jump me," said Joe positively. "One move from him, and I'll come up these stairs like a shot. Then if he's following, you clout him as he comes past. . . ."

The door was open now and Joe began his exploration. He snapped on the basement light. The squeaking stopped instantly. He went slowly down the stairs.

"He's still sitting beside the wall, and the chain's still tight," he said over his shoulder to Pearl. "I can see that from here."

"Then don't go any closer," said Pearl worriedly. "Let well enough alone."

"There's something . . ." Joe's voice trailed off. He went to the bottom of the stairs, looked at the Devil. The Devil was staring back at him, but there was no glimmer of intelligence or recognition in them. Nothing but a cowering alertness, an unblinking stare that looked almost like a trapped animal.

Then the Devil squeaked.

Joe jumped. Then he went pale.

"You're not the Devil" he gasped. "You're . . ."

There was no comment from the Devil. Nothing but another squeak, and this time the Devil scrabbled his claws about on the floor in a nervous chittering way.

"You're . . . *a mouse!*" yelled Joe. He lifted his gun and aimed between the Devil's eyes, then pulled the trigger. The gun roared in the confines of the basement, and the Devil slumped to the floor. Once or twice he kicked, then his mouth fell open, and he sagged into a limp heap.

"Joe!" screamed Pearl. "What did you do?"

"I just killed a mouse," said Joe. His voice was shaking.

"A mouse? With a gun. Are you crazy?"

"Come on down and take a look," said Joe.

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Pearl descended the stairs hesitantly, the snow shovel held at the ready, her eyes averted from the wall where the Devil was chained. "I don't see any mouse," she said. "Where is it?"

"Chained to the wall," said Joe.

"Chained . . ." Pearl looked toward the Devil and her mouth dropped open. Then she shrieked. "He's dead!" she cried out. "You've shot him."

"He's dead all right," said Joe. "But that isn't the Devil —only his body. He's traded bodies with a mouse, and he's escaped. He's loose in the world, Pearl, and he's on a rampage. And sooner or later he'll be coming back here for revenge. . . ."

Pearl's voice broke. "And for his body!" she wailed. "Oh, Joe. I'm afraid."

"We've got to get out of here," said Joe. "Upstairs, and go find the kids. We're leaving the city as fast as the car can take us. We'll go up to the country to your mother's. Maybe the Devil won't know where to find us. And maybe, in the body of a mouse, he won't be able to."

"But he won't be in the body of a mouse," said Pearl. "He'd change that almost the minute he got out of the house. No telling who's the Devil now!"

"You're right," said Joe. "All the more reason to get out of here quick. Go find the kids, while I throw our clothes in the car."

Pearl dropped the snow shovel and raced out of the basement. Joe walked over to the corpse of the Devil and gave it a kick.

"Dead all right, no doubt about it," he muttered to himself. Then he turned and went upstairs. In a moment he was stuffing clothing from all the bureau drawers and the closets into their traveling bags. When they were full he carried them out to the car. Then he went back in and came out with his arms full.

Pearl came up the walk with Jimmy by one hand and Sally by the other.

"Where are we going?" asked Sally.

"Yeah," complained Jimmy. "What's the big rush? It was my turn to bat, and we were only sixteen runs behind. . . ."

"We're going to Grandma's," said Joe. "Going up to the farm for a little vacation."

"Can I milk a cow?" asked Jimmy instantly.

"No," said Sally promptly, "I'm going to milk it!"

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She kicked Jimmy in the shin and he howled at the top of his voice.

"He's loose all right," said Joe, and Pearl nodded palely. She shook Sally and shoved her toward the car.

"Get into the car, both of you," she ordered. "I've got a few things to get from the house, and I'll be right out."

Joe groaned. "Never mind all that stuff," he said. "We've got to get out of here."

"I'm not going to get 'all that stuff'," said Pearl. "There are a *few* things a woman has to have, and a man would never think of. I won't be a minute."

And she wasn't. Almost before Joe had the kids settled in the back seat, she reappeared carrying her large purse and stuffing an assortment of things hastily into it as she ran toward the car.

"All right," she said, slipping into the front seat. "Let's go. The sooner we get away from the house, the better I'll like it."

"Me too," said Joe.

"Not me," said Jimmy darkly. "If I don't get to milk the cow, I'd rather stay here."

Sally kicked him again, and he punched her in the ribs. But her answering wail lasted but a few seconds when she observed that neither of her parents was paying any attention. She frowned at them and looked back at the house as they roared away from it.

A half-hour later, as they passed from the suburbs out into the open country, she said: "Mommy, why did you leave the front door open?"

Her mother started, turned toward Joe and laid a hand on his arm.

"The Devil with the door," said Joe. "We're not going back *now!*"

Three hours later they were well upstate, and Joe began to breathe easier. He turned on the radio. There was music on the station to which it was tuned. He began to twist the dial.

"Let me do it," said Pearl. "You pay attention to your driving."

"Get some news," said Joe. "I want to know what's going on."

"I'll get some news if some is being broadcast," said Pearl. "This isn't the time for news broadcasts, usually."

She turned the dial past several stations giving musical programs, another where a strident nasal voice was selling something that turned out to be horehound cough syrup which also cured dyspepsia, rheumatiz and cancer.

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After ten minutes of spiel, a polka began rolling out the barrel and it was obvious there would be no news on this station. Pearl went on down the dial.

". . . has settled over the city of Barcelona," said a voice. "Temporarily, a calm has replaced the rioting, and apparently the city is peaceful. What caused the sudden cessation in violence is not apparent at the moment, but the new government has stepped in and announced over the seized radio that they have assumed control and have the situation in hand.

"In Algiers, French troops are pursuing rebel raiders, who are fleeing in disorder, their initial ferocity seeming to have dissolved as rapidly as it had begun.

"Here in this country, of course, the sensational news in the suicide of Senator Schnort, who went suddenly insane, screaming that he had been hypnotized, and that he had murdered the President. He apparently used the same gun to blow out his own brains that he had used on the President."

For the next half-hour, they listened to a recital of a wave of madness that had swept the world, to be followed by a calm almost as unnatural. Then, finally, Joe switched off the radio and turned to Pearl.

"He's stopped rampaging around, and now he's probably looking for us," said Joe. He looked at his wife, and looked back at the road ahead. Then he turned to glance at her once more. She was still looking out of the rear window.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"That car," she said. "It's been sticking right behind us for miles. I think he's following us."

Joe took a quick look in the rear-vision mirror. Behind them was a new 1957 Mercury, and at the wheel was a hatless, black-haired man who seemed intent on the back of Joe's car. The man was alone in the Mercury.

"We're going pretty fast," said Joe. "Just because he's been behind us awhile doesn't mean he's following us. Now don't get to thinking every car is following us, and the Devil's behind every tree, waiting to spring out on us."

"Slow down and see if he passes us," suggested Pearl.

Joe lifted his foot very slowly off the gas pedal and the speedometer needle began dropping from 65 to 60, then down to 55, and slowly and

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steadily down to 40. The car behind made no move to pass, and Joe dropped the speed down to 30, then to 25. Still the Mercury clung to their rear.

"He *is* following us!" exclaimed Pearl.

"Not necessarily," said Joe. "I've had drivers like this behind me many times. "But we will soon find out if he *is* following us." He tramped on the gas, and the car leaped ahead. In a moment he had the speed up to 70, and kept increasing it until they were hurtling along at 90. The Mercury stayed right behind them.

Jimmy's voice came in his ear now. "Beat him, Daddy!" he said excitedly. "Race him good. He can't beat us!"

"He could if he wanted to," muttered Joe to himself. He eased off on the gas again, and the needle dropped to 65 once more.

Pearl was pale. "He's following us, isn't he?" she said more than asked.

"I don't know yet," said Joe. "We'll find out in the town just ahead. I'm going to take a few turns . . ." his voice trailed off.

As they passed the city limits, Joe dropped his speed to well below the posted limit and watched for a stop light ahead. Finally, he saw one, and he timed his arrival. Abruptly, as he reached it, he shot the car through the amber light just as the red flashed on. The Mercury stopped for the red light, and as the image receded in the rear-vision mirror, Joe breathed easier. "He didn't go through the red light," he said.

Pearl was watching. "The light's changing again," she said. "He's coming up pretty fast."

Joe put on his right-turn light and made a normal turn at the next corner. The Mercury made the turn too. Joe made another right turn two blocks down. The Mercury made one too.

"That settles it," said Joe. "He's following us all right."

Once again he maneuvered the car back onto the main highway and then continued through the heart of town. The Mercury was right behind, but now there was a car which had slipped in between. Joe timed his speed again, and once more barely made it through an amber light before the red. The car behind him halted, and so did the Mercury, by necessity. Joe poured on the gas and at the next corner turned right. He sped to the next block, turned

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right again, then left at an alley. He roared through it, turned right once more, and raced three blocks along the way they had come, and finally made another right turn back to the main street. He was lucky, and made it through a green light. Several more turns, and he headed straight out of town at right angles to his original route. Moments later they found themselves on a gravel road marked County Trunk M.

"Is there anything behind us?" asked Joe.

Pearl, who had been watching alertly all the while, turned and sat down facing the front again. "Nothing," she said. "You've shaken him."

"I was lucky," Joe observed. "Got every break. Now we will take a few byways for awhile, and then take a look at the map and see where we are. We can get to your mother's by another route. We'll get there late tonight, but at least we've lost the Devil for awhile—if that's who he was."

"Who else would it have been?" asked Pearl.

"Ed Sullivan, trying to sell another Mercury," joked Joe. But deep inside him he didn't feel humorous. Did the Devil have a way of knowing where they were? This first time it was conceivable that he'd caught them leaving the house, and had followed them all the way. But if he hadn't, then he had some other way of knowing, and if that was true, they wouldn't really have ditched him. He'd pick up the trail again, and all his evasive tactics would have been in vain.

"He must have followed us from the house," said Pearl suddenly.

Joe looked at her. "You've been thinking the same thing I have," he said. "I *hope* that's how he found us!"

"I hope so too," said Pearl.

"Daddy, I'm hungry," said Jimmy from the back seat.

"Okay, son. But you'll have to wait until we find a town. Then we'll stop at a restaurant."

"How are you going to find a town on this road?" said Jimmy disgustedly. "Why did you go on such a bumpy road. Is this the way to Grandma's house?"

"Not exactly," said Joe. "We just took a little detour."

"To keep that man with the horns from following us?" asked Jimmy.

Joe gripped the wheel tightly. "Horns?" he asked, staring at Pearl. "What man with horns?"

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"Why that man we were racing with. He had horns growing out of his head."

"I didn't see any horns," said Joe.

"He did too have horns," said Jimmy. "I didn't like him, and I'm glad you got away from him. But now I'm hungry."

"I'm glad too, son," said Joe. He licked his lips. "But it must have been that man's hair that looked like horns. He didn't really have any."

"When are we going to get to a restaurant?" inquired Jimmy impatiently. "I'm awful hungry!"

Pearl laid a hand on Joe's arm. "Don't press it, Joe. Sometimes children see things grownups can't. Let him forget it."

Joe nodded, and for a moment there was silence. Then Jimmy's voice piped up again.

"I won't forget it," he said positively. "They were *red* horns."

They had eaten, having eventually found a small town with a restaurant, and now they were on their way again. The children were asleep in the back seat, and Pearl was studying a road map with the aid of a dash light that came on when she opened the ashtray.

"A few miles more, and we will be on Highway 10. That will run into 38, and we can take that down to 26. From there it's only ten miles to Mother's place."

"How many miles?"

Pearl began adding the figures on the map. Finally, she said, "About one hundred and thirty."

"That'll get us to your mother's by about eleven. They'll be in bed."

"Can't be helped," said Pearl. "Unless we stop at the next town and phone ahead."

"Good idea. We'll do it. Then they can have a place ready for the kids. They'll be crabby when we wake them, and if the bed's ready, we can just dump them into it."

They drove on a few minutes in silence, then Pearl said, "The Devil's in a very unusual position."

"How so?"

"Well, if you actually killed his real body while he was out of it, then I presume it's useless to him any more."

"I suppose it is," conceded Joe.

"Then he'll have to continue to use the bodies of other people, or of other—things."

"Won't change things any," observed Joe. "He used other people's bodies at will anyway. At least that's what he

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inferred when he talked about hypnotizing me and using my body. Now he'll just have to do it all the time. Nobody knew when he was among them before, and that hasn't changed."

"The point is, he hasn't any body of his own, any more. If it were me, I'd be very much disturbed and put out about it. And I'd be determined to get even. Joe, we're running away now, and we've eluded him for now, but how can we do it all our lives? Sooner or later he'll find us, and we'll have to live in fear of that moment at all times. I don't think I can face the prospect."

"But now you are jumping to conclusions," argued Joe. "How do you know he can find us? Does he even know our names?"

"I . . . I don't think so," confessed Pearl. "We never mentioned it—but didn't you say he knew you were a private detective, and that's why he selected you as his base of operations for whatever it was he wanted to stir up in our town?"

"Yes, he did," admitted Joe. "So I'll grant you, it is most likely that he does know our name. So we can change it."

"What kind of a life is it going to be, living under assumed names, looking into dark corners, suspecting every person we see?" said Pearl, almost in tears. "I don't think I can take it."

"But what else can we do?"

"I don't know. But there *must* be something."

"He's not all-powerful," said Joe. "Otherwise he'd have the whole roost to himself. The churches wouldn't exist. . . ."

He looked suddenly at Pearl. "The churches!" he exclaimed. "They've been his competition for two thousand years—they must know something about how to handle him! We'll go to a priest, get his advice. I've heard of certain rites and chants to exorcise devils. They must have one for Satan himself!"

"When we get to the next town, I'll call Mother," said Pearl, "and you go to the parish house and talk to the priest. Maybe there's something he can do to help us be prepared. We might need that help even tonight. I keep feeling that there is a way the Devil knows things, and that he'd know where to find us when he wants to."

"Maybe in his own body, yes. But in a human body, he might be subject to some limitations. Let's hope clairvoy-

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ance is one of the things he won't be able to exercise to full effect."

"You're whistling in the dark," said Pearl.

Joe didn't answer her. He was looking at some headlights coming up behind them. For several miles he watched them, then breathed in relief as they turned off. At least the Devil hadn't found them yet.

They came to a small town soon, and stopped at a filling station across from a church. Pearl used the phone while Joe had the car gassed up. He questioned the attendant and found that the priest lived right next door to the church, and that he usually was in at this time of the evening.

When the car had been serviced, he pulled it over to the side and waited until Pearl came out of the station.

"Did you get her?" he asked.

"Yes. She'll be waiting for us."

"Good. You stay with the kids while I go see the priest."

Joe crossed the street and went up to the door of the parish house. He rang the bell. The housekeeper came to the door and welcomed him in with a smile.

"Father Lengowski will be out in a moment," she said, indicating a chair in the waiting room.

Joe had barely settled himself when the priest walked in. He was a jovial type, and his voice was booming. "What can I do for you, young man?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Joe hesitantly. "I came for a little information, and perhaps for a little advice."

"Are you in trouble?" asked the priest.

"Not in the usual way," said Joe. "But I *am* in trouble. Maybe I'd better explain it. You see, several months ago the Devil came to my house, and said he was going to set up headquarters for some new deviltry he had in mind in my town. He also said he was going to use my body while he was there, and that he'd take over by hypnosis. Well, I can't be hypnotized, so it didn't work—but we scuffled. He was choking me, and would have gained control of my body except for my wife. She hit him over the head with a snow shovel, and while he was unconscious we chained him to the basement wall where I formerly kept a big dog of mine. We nailed the basement door shut, and left him there. But he finally escaped, by changing bodies

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with a mouse. That's when this trouble in the world started—you'll recollect that for several months, crime and evil had taken a holiday. . . ."

He stopped, and eyed the priest, who had been staring at him and licking his lips. "You don't believe me," he said.

"It isn't a matter of belief," said the priest. "But granting that all this is true, what do you want of me?"

"Just some information. For instance, I believe the Church knows some means of exorcism, or some way of overcoming the Devil's influence."

"Well, yes, there are such things. But why do you wish to know this? As you say, the Devil is no longer at your house. . . ."

"True enough. But you see, when I found out he'd escaped, I shot the mouse. . . ."

"Shot . . . the mouse?" Father Lengowski shifted his feet nervously.

"Well, that is, I shot the Devil's body, thus killing the mouse. Of course, it also made it impossible for the Devil to regain his own body—it was quite dead and useless."

"I see . . . and what can the exorcism rites do?"

"Well, you see, the Devil is very angry with us, and he's been following us in a Mercury. We eluded him in a town awhile back, and now we're on our way to my wife's mother's place, to sort of hide out awhile. But if he should find us, we'd like some sort of defense. . . ."

"Exorcism might work," said Father Lengowski nervously. "But we'd have to have the Devil, or the possessed person, right before us, and you couldn't do it. I don't believe I could do it. Perhaps the Bishop . . ."

"I'm afraid such a complicated procedure won't help, Father Lengowski. There won't be time, if he should appear. What I want is something we can use ourselves, in an emergency."

"Well, there is an old standby," said Father Lengowski, "very simple. I will give you a blessed crucifix, and you merely hold it before you, thrusting it out at the Devil, and utter the words 'Get Thee behind me, Satan.' "

"I've heard of that," admitted Joe.

"Good. You wait here, and I'll get a crucifix." The priest hastened from the room, closing the door behind him. But it did not latch securely, and slowly swung open again. And Joe heard the priest's

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voice speaking urgently on the phone in the hallway outside. He heard a few words, and then, face growing red, he leaped to his feet and made his way swiftly to the door. He let himself out and ran down the steps and across the street to the car. He piled into the front seat and jabbed his thumb on the starter button.

"What's the matter?" asked Pearl in alarm.

"Nothing much. That priest thinks I'm a nut, and he's calling the local gendarmes. We've got to get out of here before we wind up in the bug-pokey. I've learned one thing in there—we can't go around saying the Devil's chasing us in a Mercury!"

"Oh, Joe!" said Pearl, then subsided, her face strained in the darkness as Joe drove hastily out of town.

"We're almost there," said Pearl. "We've just passed the Jacobi's place."

It was after midnight, and Joe sighed in relief. He was tired of driving, and the tension had been telling on him. He had found himself staring at the rear-view mirror half the time, almost dreading the appearance of any headlights coming from behind. And when they had appeared, he had waited anxiously, slowing the car for the headlights to pass. They always did, but he continually expected that they would not, that instead they would pull up behind, and settle into steady pursuit.

"Do you think we dare tell your mother anything about all this?" he asked.

"Heavens, no!" said Pearl. "At least not for a few days. We can tell Dad, though. I think, without too much trouble. He's always believed me, and he will still, I know."

"Then mum's the word until you break the ice," said Joe. "We'll just get the kids to bed, and then get to bed ourselves as fast as we can. There'll be plenty of time later to talk."

The porch light was on when he drove the car into the farmyard. A swarm of bugs flew dizzily around it, and literally coated the living-room window, where a light was on.

As he turned off the ignition, Pearl's mother appeared in the doorway. "I'll open the door and you come in quick," she called. "I don't want all these bugs to swarm in."

"You needn't have left the light on," said Joe. "We'd have found our way."

He turned to Pearl. "You take one of the suitcases and go ahead, get the bed ready. I'll bring Sally first, then

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come back for Jimmy. I don't think either of them will wake up."

The children did not wake, although Jimmy mumbled something about horns, and his grandmother thought it was very cute.

"The lad's dreaming," she said.

"I wish he were," said Joe.

Grandmother looked at him blankly. "But he is. He's talking about somebody with horns. He's having a nightmare—oh, he isn't sick, is he?" Immediately she hovered over Jimmy like the epitome of anxiety itself.

"Of course not," Joe assured her. "He's sound as a bell. I merely meant I hoped he wasn't having a nightmare."

But as he put Jimmy down on the bed to which Grandmother led him, he was frowning slightly. It should not be like a small boy to dream of the Devil, especially if he didn't know he was the Devil. It didn't seem that the afternoon's experience should have created so deep an impression upon him that it would recur in his dreams. Did it mean that somehow Jimmy was sensing the Devil, and his possible nearness? Was the Devil really on their trail, homing in on them with some occult sense peculiarly his own?

Out in the living room, Pearl was engaging in animated conversation with her mother. Already they were inspecting pictures of the other seventy-seven grandchildren, and gossiping like mad. Joe interrupted.

"Mother," he said, "I've always admired your common sense, and I just know you want us all to go to bed immediately, and save all the visiting for tomorrow. Please don't let us keep you from your beauty rest."

"You're always so tactful," she said in return. "I've always said you were a wonderful son-in-law. A wonderful husband and father. A fine . . ."

"Thank you, Mother. Now show us where we sleep, and we'll let you get back into your comfy bed."

"You'll sleep in our bed, and Dad and I will take the couch and the davenport."

"Oh, no," protested Joe. "Pearl and I can sleep on the couch and davenport. No use you giving up your bed. Besides Dad doesn't like those broken springs on the couch . . . do you, Dad?"

His father-in-law grinned. "Of course not, son. But you are dealing with your mother-

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in-law, and there's no arguing. For thirty years she has made a practice of making herself—and me—uncomfortable when the kids come home. She couldn't sleep if she wasn't putting herself out!"

"Yeah, I know," agreed Joe. "The Mother-Martyr complex. She's got the worst case I ever saw!"

"Joe, you're the greatest kidder . . ." said Grandmother.

"Who's kidding?" asked Joe, grinning at her. "Show me to my bedroom before you change your mind."

Long after the house was silent, he lay beside Pearl, thinking.

"Are you asleep?" she asked finally.

"You're awake too?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I keep thinking of the Devil looking for us," said Joe.

"And I keep thinking he'll find us," said Pearl. "Somehow, I have a feeling we're not fooling him at all."

"Go to sleep," said Joe. "He'd have to have radar to find us."

"You know," said Pearl, "that's a good name for it! And right now I feel like a blip on a radar screen."

"But a mighty pretty blip," said Joe. He kissed her good night and then turned on his shoulder to go to sleep.

In the morning he awoke to find Pearl already up. He climbed into his clothes and went out into the kitchen. Pearl was sitting at the table, eating a grapefruit.

"Where's your mother?" asked Joe.

"Out in the driveway, talking to somebody—a neighbor, I suppose."

The kitchen door opened, and Dad came in, carrying a gallon jug full of fresh milk and two freshly picked muskmelons cradled in one arm. "First ones ripe," he said cheerfully. "We'll let you kids initiate the patch. Where's Mother? She can fix them for us. . . ."

"Out front, talking to a neighbor," said Joe.

Dad deposited the melons on the sink and set the jug of milk in the refrigerator. "Neighbor? Wonder who'd stop out front, and not drive right into the yard. . . ?"

He walked through the house to the front room, and peered out through the curtains. Then he came back.

"Ain't no neighbor," he said. "Somebody in a Mercury."

Joe jumped and Pearl dropped her spoon.

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"Here, let me get you another spoon," said Dad. "Floor's pretty dirty—we had thrashers here yesterday. . . ."

The sound of footsteps on the back porch preceded the opening of the screen door. Pearl and Joe turned and stared.

"Why, Joe," said Pearl's mother. "You up already? You could have stayed in bed a couple more hours, and got your sleep out." She walked up to him, took his face in her hands, and kissed him. Then she turned. "Dad, you found some ripe melons!" she exclaimed. "How lovely. I'll fix them right now, and we'll have them before I fix the pancakes."

Joe looked at Pearl, then sat down at a chair. "I'm starved," he said. "Those pancakes sound real good."

"Who was that outside?" asked Dad.

"Oh, some fellow asking the directions to Highway 13."

"I suppose you told him to take the next fork to the left, then turn right at Perkin's general store," said Dad.

"Why, of course, Dad," said Mother. "That's the way to go, isn't it?"

"No," said Dad.

She turned and put her hands on her hips. "Now, Dad, you know very well that is the way to Highway 13."

"Usually," agreed Dad. "But it's closed now. Under repair. If he takes it, he'll be axle-deep in sand inside a quarter mile."

"Oh, dear, I forgot about that," said Mother, anxiety showing itself on her face.

"Don't worry about it," said Dad. "If he does get stuck, he'll come walking back here, and I can make five dollars pulling him out with the tractor."

"You know you won't do any such thing," declared Mother. "You never charged anybody yet for pulling them out. Land sakes, you want Joe to think you're a highwayman?"

"Isn't that why you sent him that way, so I could make five dollars?" asked Dad, a twinkle in his eye.

"No, it isn't," said Mother. "But, come to think of it, it is a good idea, isn't it?"

"If I didn't know you," said Dad, "I'd say you meant that. You aren't usually a kidder, Mother. What's got into you?"

"Maybe it's Joe," said Mother. "He appreciates kidding, don't you, Joe?"

"Sometimes," said Joe, looking at her sharply. There was no twinkle in her eye. "But I didn't know you could

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do it with such a straight face?"

"Don't see why not," she said. She turned back to the sink. "Do you kids want some ice cream in your melons?"

"In the morning, for breakfast?" asked Pearl.

"Dad will eat ice cream any time," she said, "and as long as he'll be having some, we might as well all do the same. These melons are delicious that way, and who cares what time of day it is?"

"I want some melon with ice cream in it, too!"

Jimmy's piping voice came from the doorway, and he pranced out into the kitchen in his shorts.

"Looks like I should have gotten some more melons," said Dad, beginning to move toward the door.

"Never mind," said Mother. "He can have my piece. I don't feel like eating anyway. Jimmy, go get some clothes on before you catch cold. This morning air is a bit chilly—Dad, close the door."

"Why, Grandma, what big horns you have," said Jimmy, staring at her.

Joe froze in his chair.

Dad chuckled as he made his way to the door to close it. "Like father, like son," he said. "Already he's kidding his Grandma! Hey, here comes that fellow already, walking back. He got stuck, all right!"

Pearl's chair fell over with a clatter as she rose abruptly to her feet. She faced the door, her face white.

Joe recognized him the minute he came to the door. It was the man who had been driving the Mercury the day before. But before he could utter a word, the man dashed into the kitchen, then ran for the living room without a backward glance.

"Hey, young feller!" exclaimed Dad. "Where you think you're going?" He began to follow, but almost immediately the young man reappeared, a crucifix clutched in his hand, and he faced Pearl's mother, brandishing it wildly.

Pearl leaped to the stove and picked up the poker. With a set expression on her face she ran toward the young man. Joe leaped forward and grabbed her.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Do you want to knock your mother out?"

Pearl froze in his grasp, and complete silence settled over the kitchen. Except for Jimmy. He was eyeing the young man brandishing the crucifix. "Daddy was right,"

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he said. "You don't have red horns, Mister."

He turned to his grandmother. "But Grandma does!" he said triumphantly.

Pearl moaned and slumped to the floor in a faint.

"Yes, son," said the young man, advancing toward the older woman. "He's got horns, all right! He's the Devil. But I won't have any Devil in my house!"

He advanced upon Pearl's mother, thrust out the crucifix and said in loud tones, "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

The old lady smiled, walked around the young man, and stood behind him. "Anything you wish," she said.

"Now, just a minute," said Dad, his bewilderment complete. "What in thunderation's going on here? Mother, I don't know what you think you're doing, but you're much too old to carry on like this with a strange young man. And don't banter with the Devil's name after all these years!"

The young man stood horror-stricken, staring at the crucifix in his hand, and then he uttered a cry of despair and slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

"Pick her up and put her on the bed!" yelled Joe. "Get her out of here, and stay out yourself. This is something for Pearl and I to handle. . . ."

"Pick her up," said Dad dazedly. "Son, are you going daffy, too? "You've got her in your arms already. Carry her into the bedroom yourself—you're younger'n I am."

"No, no," said Joe, pointing to the young man on the floor. "Pick her . . ."

"Let her lay there," said Mother to Dad. "It's time we cut out this silly business. I've got a score to settle, and now that the cat's out of the bag, and your wife spoiled all my fun by getting stuck in the sand and ruining my post-hypnotic suggestions, I might as well settle it and be on my way."

Dad staggered over to a kitchen chair and slumped down into it. "Will somebody explain what's going on?" he begged. "I'm an old man, but I didn't think I was going crazy. Or am I?"

Pearl was coming to now, and she struggled to her feet. Joe steadied her a moment, then he looked at Dad. "No, you're not going crazy, Dad. We came here last night because we were fleeing from the Devil. He was chained up in our basement for months, but he escaped, and took the body of this young man lying

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on the floor—only it isn't a young man, now, but your wife. He switched bodies with her this morning when he stopped in front of the house. The Devil's in your wife's body now. And he's come to kill Pearl and I out of vengeance for my killing his own body."

"It's true, Dad," said Pearl. "Can't you see that he's the Devil?"

Her father looked at the body of his wife, standing there eyeing them all quizzically. Then he nodded. "Yes, I can see it. He's the Devil, all right. I've met him before. I recognize him now."

"That's right," said the Devil, grinning. "I remember you, too. You were quite a lad before you married and settled down!"

On the floor now, the body of the young man was stirring, and finally it sat up. The Devil looked at it.

"This body's messy with virtue," he said. "I think I'll switch back for a moment. After all, I don't have any argument with you and your wife, and we did have fun, years ago. The memory of it is rather pleasant."

"To you, perhaps," said Dad, "but not to me, I've put all that behind me, and if I had it to do over again . . ."

"I know," said the young man, getting to his feet. "Women are always reforming men, and ruining them for my purposes. But that's past now, and I lost that game. Right now I've got a grudge to settle."

Pearl's mother uttered a low moan and rushed over and huddled close to her husband. He put a protective arm around her shoulder.

The Devil turned to Joe. "What makes you think I intend killing you both?" he asked. "That's crude, and what would I stand to gain? You're both going to die some day, anyway, and in your present condition, I won't have any chance at you afterward. So, does it make sense that I'd let you slip out of my clutches that way?"

Joe looked at him. "I guess I see your point," he agreed. "But what are you going to do?"

The Devil grinned. "How would you like to be married to me?" he asked.

"Don't be queer!" snapped Joe.

"I mean to this body I'm wearing now?" asked the Devil.

Joe gasped. "You mean . . ."

"Why not? I think it's a very delicate bit of artistry,

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myself. Imagine it. You will make a lovely couple, both male, and your wife will be such a good mother to the children. Will be rather strange for them to have to call a man Mother, but I presume they will get used to it—or will they? How would you explain it to them? That their mother has suddenly become a man? And you, think of your position. You love your wife dearly, I know. And what an interesting situation as you take her into your arms and kiss her tenderly, and . . ."

"Stop!" roared Joe, leaping forward. "I'll tear you limb from limb first! I killed you once before, and by Heaven, I'll do it again!"

But before he could make another move, little Jimmy raced forward, and clutching the Devil by the leg bit hard into the calf. The Devil yelped in pain, but then he recovered and grinned. "The lad has possibilities. And who am I to deny him an occasional bite out of his mother's leg."

He disengaged the boy's grasp from his leg and pushed him gently aside. His grandmother reached out and pulled him to her, and the youngster stood with her arms protectively around him, glaring at the Devil.

"You've got your horns back again," he said accusingly.

"You just keep your eyes on those horns, son," advised the Devil. "In a moment you'll see them again, and in an interesting place. . . ." He turned to stare at Pearl, and his gaze became penetrating.

Joe took another step forward, his face livid, but the Devil waved an arm, and Joe stood rooted to the spot, overcome by a strange paralysis.

Pearl went white. "No . . ." she gasped.

"But, yes," said the Devil. "I have frequently been a beautiful woman, but I must admit, never one quite so beautiful. I believe I will enjoy using your body for the next twenty or thirty years. Believe me, I'll take good care of it. It won't grow old and fade as it would if you were using it. I wouldn't be surprised if it eventually became somebody very important, perhaps even a queen, or the wife of a president. Some position where I can control the world politically as well as morally and anti-ecclesiastically."

He advanced slowly toward Pearl, his gaze boring into her eyes. "Don't resist, girl," he said. "It won't take but a second, and you'll be rid of me.

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I promise I won't bother you and your family again. You'll be free to live out your lives in whatever happiness you choose to make of them. . . ."

Pearl stood stiffly now, her face a mask of utter horror. Joe felt a wave of blackness engulfing him, a wave of sheer hate that almost consumed him, but he could not move a muscle. Then, as Pearl seemed to wilt for a moment, seemed about to fall, there came the rush of bare feet and a childish scream as Sally flung herself into the room and raced straight toward the Devil.

Her slim arms were extended, and she hit the Devil full in the back. He staggered forward, tripped on the rug, and crashed headlong against the refrigerator. He dropped like a poled ox and lay there, unconscious.

Joe, released from the paralysis that held him, leaped forward and hurled himself upon the Devil's body. Granddad, too, swung into action, and between them they both knelt on an arm of the prone Devil, and then Joe barked: "Mother, fetch a clothesline. We've got to tie him up. Once we've done that, you go and get a log chain, Dad, and we'll chain him up out in the old storm cellar."

"You bet," said Dad. "And then we'll bulldoze enough dirt over it so he'll never get out!"

"Now you're talking," said Joe. "Not even a mouse must get into that cellar. . . ."

He clamped a hand on the Devil's throat and held it in readiness. Don't look at him, anybody," he warned. "He's coming to. Hurry with that clothesline, Mother!"

The Devil's eyes opened, and he looked up dazedly. There was no recognition in them. He looked up at Joe. "What's happened?" he asked, then groaned. He closed his eyes a moment as a wave of dizziness obviously swept over him. Then he opened them again. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Don't you know?" asked Joe, puzzled by something he saw, or rather didn't see, in the eyes that looked up at him.

The man stared at him with a dazed air of incomprehension.

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Who are you?" asked Joe.

"I . . ." A look of surprise flitted over the man's face. "I . . . don't know. I can't seem to remember a thing."

"Don't believe him, son," said Dad. "He's trying to pull a fast one."

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Joe looked at Pearl's father in startlement. "You've been looking at him . . ." his voice trailed off.

Pearl came over and looked, too. "He . . . doesn't look like the Devil," she said hesitantly.

"I feel like the devil," said the young man. "And you two are sure hard on my arms. They're getting numb."

Joe eased up, then slid his knees off to the floor. "I guess I can hold him if he tries anything, Dad. You can get off him now."

Dad got to his feet and stood aside, watchfully.

"Got that rope, Mother?" he asked. She handed it to him.

"You going to tie me up?" asked the young man in dazed tones. "What's going on here?"

"I believe he's got amnesia from hitting his head on the refrigerator," said Pearl.

Joe looked undecided. "You don't remember who you are?" he asked.

The young man shook his head. "I don't remember a thing. All I know is that I'm lying here and you two are apparently bent on strangling me. Can you tell me why?"

"I can tell you why, but if you've got amnesia, I don't think I should. In fact, if you aren't faking, you'll never know why, believe me!"

"Joe," said Pearl. "I think he's gone."

"He can't be," said Joe positively.

"But why?"

"I'll tell you later," said Joe. He turned to Jimmy. "Come over here, son. I want to whisper in your ear." He handed Pearl the poker. "Clout him over the head if he makes a move," he directed.

Then he leaned over and whispered in his son's ear. Jimmy listened, then he stared at the young man. He nodded.

Joe whispered some more, and Jimmy nodded again, a look of importance spreading over his face.

"Okay," said Joe. "Now you and Sally go and get dressed. I want to take you both over to the barn and we'll have a go at milking that cow."

With expressions of delight, both children raced off.

Joe turned to Pearl's mother. "How about those pancakes?" he asked. "I'm hungry, and I think our friend is, too. After what we have done to him, I think we owe him a breakfast, at least."

He turned to the young man. "Feel able to get to your feet?"

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The young man felt of the top of his head gingerly. "I guess so. And I think I'm hungry, too, now that you mention it. Those pancakes sound kind of interesting." He got to his feet, looked uncertainly around at the wondering faces of Pearl's mother, father, and Pearl herself. He smiled. "I don't know what's been going on, but maybe after some of those pancakes, you'll explain."

Pearl looked at her husband. "After pancakes, you aren't the only one who'll want some explaining!"

"That goes for me, too, Daughter," said Dad. "I can't say that I've ever experienced a morning quite like this in my life before. But one thing seems right, and I agree with Joe . . ."

"Mother," interrupted Joe, "how about the pancakes?" He stepped over to his father-in-law and whispered in his ear. The older man started, looked at his wife, then grinned. "You're right, son. What she doesn't know, won't hurt her."

"What I don't know, doesn't matter much," she returned, looking at him with a twinkle in her eye.

Joe looked at her. "I guess it doesn't, at that," he said.

Breakfast finished, Joe looked at their bewildered guest.

"I can't tell you who you are, just at this moment," he began, "but when Dad gets the tractor out, we'll go down the road and pull your car out where it's stuck. . . ."

"My car?"

"Yes. It's a Mercury, and your name ought to be on the ownership card fastened to the steering wheel. That'll be a start. Once you know your name and address, you can go on from there. Somehow, you have suffered amnesia. Maybe you had an accident. Anyway, you came rushing in here and caused a commotion, and in the scuffle, you knocked yourself out against the refrigerator."

"Oh. And that's why you were holding me down, and wanting to tie me up?"

"For a moment it looked as though you were a dangerous maniac," admitted Joe. "You can't blame us for not taking chances."

"Of course, not . . ." The young man drew a hand across his forehead. "I certainly must have had a real blow. I just don't remember a thing. You say I own a Mercury, but it means nothing to me. I know a Mercury is a car, for instance, but that's about

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all. I seem to know how to talk, what pancakes should taste like . . . except that I'm almost willing to wager that I never tasted any as good as these before."

"Thank you," said Mother, beaming.

"I shouldn't wonder if your past way of life would all fit into place in your mind, and even though you might not regain full memory, you'd be able to take up where you left off. When you get back to your family . . ."

The young man shook his head. "I don't think I've got a family. It just doesn't register. Not like the pancakes, or that a Mercury is a car . . ."

Joe got to his feet. "Come on, Dad, let's get the tractor and get that Mercury out. Once our friend here knows who he is, maybe he can remember the details, and be on his way."

The young man got to his feet eagerly. "Yes, let's go. I do have a burning curiosity, and you can hardly blame me, can you?" He turned to Pearl's mother. "I want to thank you for your hospitality, and I want you to know I'll never forget those pancakes, no matter what else I've forgotten!"

He turned to Pearl, bowed slightly. "It has been nice meeting you, and those lovely children of yours."

Joe led the way out the kitchen door and waved back at Pearl. "Don't worry about a thing," he said. "I'll be back just as soon as we get our friend out of the sand."

Later, Joe sat in the living room, and he was surrounded by three human question marks.

"The children are up at Aunt Margie's," said Pearl. "And now you'd better tell us what all this is about?"

"It's simple," said Joe. "The Devil has a case of amnesia. As long as he has it, we're safe. If he recovers his memory, we may be in for it again. But I have a feeling he won't recover it—perhaps not for a thousand years."

"Not for a thousand years?" asked Dad. "How do you figure that?"

"Well, in the first place, the Devil isn't gone. That is, he didn't suddenly leave the body of that young man, as you all seem to think."

"How do you know that?" asked Pearl.

"Easy. I killed the mouse."

"The mouse?"

"Yes. The Devil traded places originally with a mouse, and then traded places with this young man. But the

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mouse was dead, so the mouse's body was empty of a mouse, if I make myself clear. Thus, the mouse is still the young man, and always will be. The Devil will be the young man, because his own body is dead. That is, he'll be the young man until he recovers his memory, if he ever does, and then he could be anybody. I hope it never happens."

"How can you be absolutely sure all this is a fact?" asked Pearl.

"Jimmy told me," grinned Joe.

"Jimmy?"

"Yes. Remember when I whispered to him? Well, I asked him if the man still had horns, and he did. Then I told him that it was a very important secret, and that he was never to discuss it with anyone, except me. You see, I didn't want anybody to blurt out the word Devil while the young man was here. Such a thing might be just the key to bring back his memory."

"But won't he remember, anyway, just as soon as he gets to putting things together, when he gets back to where the young man has his home and friends?" asked Dad.

"Why should he? The stimulus of his name, his family, his home should only serve to add to his subconscious memories as the young man. He now has the brain and body of a man who has lost his memory. The Devil can't remember anything but what's already in the young man's mind. If his *own* memory is never stirred, the chances are he will never realize his true identity. He will gradually take on the only one handy, that of the young man, and he might well turn out to be a model citizen!"

"So that's what you mean by him being an amnesiac for a thousand years?" asked Dad.

"Yes. The Bible says the Devil will be bound for a thousand years, cast into a pit. Must we take that literally? Can't the binding be a mental one, and can't the pit be amnesia?"

"It could be," said Mother suddenly. "Even hell, I believe, is a state of mind."

Pearl started. "Does that mean that now we'll have no more crime on earth, no more evil?"

"I'm afraid not," said Dad. "I know one thing for sure, the Devil is not the author of *all* evil. Mankind is cussed enough in his own right, and even with the Devil suffering

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from amnesia, I feel sure there'll be plenty of trouble going on."

"But not *quite* as much," said Joe, looking at Dad. "With one less evil companion, things should be a mite better, don't you think?"

"Your logic," said Dad, "is unassailable."

Pearl looked thoughtful. "What if the young man meets a girl, falls in love, and she him, and marries her? She'd be married to the Devil, in actuality."

Dad grinned at her. "It wouldn't be the first young man to be reformed. In that case, I'd say, the Devil would be better off with amnesia!"

THE END

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COSMIC STRIPTEASE

By E. K. JARVIS

A picture is worth a thousand words—especially if they're Martian words and nobody can understand them. So Mars put on a spectacular for Earth, using the skies as a TV screen. This proved the superiority of their science. But their morals — Wow!

THE Atlas didn't make it—it blew up. And so did the Thor. The Vulcan wasn't much better; it just went *pfftt*. None of them got anywhere near outer space—the *real* outer space. Oh, yes, they went up hundreds of miles, even thousands. The Vulcan went nearly five thousand. But they were still in the Electro-Magnetic Field. Nobody really understood the EMF. Einstein had hit on it with his final theory, before he died. He said gravity and magnetism were just manifestations of something else, some single thing that held the very secret of matter.

It was suspected that the Vulcan had reached the limits of the EMF, but nobody was sure. You can't be very sure about a thing that just goes *pfftt*, and then isn't there any more. Not there at all! That's what radar said, and telescopes, and theodolites, and every other detection apparatus conceivable. Not until the Jason went up where no rocket had ever gone were they sure. Sure that man would never leave the confines of his EMF—at least until he solved the problem of the nature of the EMF. And that seemed the problem of the nature of matter itself. You'll have to admit, that's a difficult problem to tackle.

Yes, they tackled it. Theories were a dime a dozen. But just *what* the EMF really was, nobody could say even mathematically. Instead of wasting money on rockets that went *pfftt*, they began to investigate space with rays, frequencies, radiations, echoes, electronic things the man in the street just didn't understand. What he did understand, however, was the answer that came back from space, as a result of all this electronic probing.

Mars picked us up, and answered!

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Millions of Earthlings gaped while the Martian show went on.

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We thought we had quite a bit of electronic science. But we turned out to be babes in the woods. The Martians knew more about rays and waves and frequencies and vibrations than the Yanks knew about buying baseball players. They had a real cool signal. They called it the Resonating Magnetic Field. You know what a resonating field is, don't you? It's like a great big drum—you hit it right, and it'll vibrate with the biggest boom you ever heard. It resonates.

Our scientists knew how to resonate crystals; but the Martians could resonate the atmosphere. And when they resonated our atmosphere, every Earthman dug them, no matter where he was. That's the way their first signal reached us—a resonant voice sounded clearly everywhere on Earth, speaking in the language of the area in which it was heard. It was all a matter of resonant pitch. A thought has a basic wave, and it can be keyed to any pitch. When you say something, you express a thought by resonating the atmosphere. No matter if you speak English, or German, or Brooklyn—it's all the same thought. Well, when the Martians talked, we, each of us, were our own wave converter, and the vibrations that hit our eardrums came out whatever language we talked.

How did they do it? Well, how do you explain electronic knowledge as advanced as that? You're right, they didn't. They didn't even try. They said we wouldn't get it anyway, so why waste airtime?

A few of our big-domes were incensed, but the Martians let them smoke. They said they'd been watching our rocket efforts, and had figured we were pretty stupid, since everybody in the Solar System (and outside it for that matter) knew you couldn't lick the EMF with rockets. But then we'd started our electronic probing of outer space, and they lifted their mental eyebrows. It, they said, gave them the itch to give us a few pointers.

You can imagine the fuss there was in the Pentagon; and in the Kremlin for that matter. Here was a chance to load up on classified stuff of the highest order, and something called an RMF was the biggest leak the world had ever known.

Well, the Martians deep-froze that kind of idea right away. They weren't going to have any truck with secrets,

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especially secret weapons. They gave us quite a ribbing about weapons, and there were a lot of red faces on Earth. They were civilized, they said, and even their plows had been beaten into resonators. They had a highly developed moral sense, and the word war appeared in their dictionaries only in the archaic section.

They were going to tell us a lot of things, to be sure, but they were going to elevate us. They were going to make real ladies and gentlemen out of us, like they were. And as a beginning, they said they were going to put on a pageant. They were going to depict life on Mars for us as it was today, in all its glory and perfection, and they were going to do it in the form of a play.

You can picture the Broadway producers perking up their ears at this, and right away they began thinking of the whole thing in the terms of a "production." Naturally, when the Martians said it would be done via world-wide television, the big networks immediately sensed a big deal, and they jumped almost as high as Vulcan.

But the Martians said the broadcast didn't need receivers, but that the sky itself would be the TV screen. This was going to be exactly the opposite of closed-circuit TV. This was wide open—as wide open as Minsky's in the Twenties.

Nobody knows how they did it, but NBC and CBS got a dual contract with the Martians for the commercials! Yes, it's true. The Martians agreed to monitor their commercials, and then rebroadcast them as part of the Big Show that was to introduce Earthmen to Martians.

The sponsors weren't difficult to sell! They fell all over themselves to get spots on the program.

Actually, the whole thing was the most serious development in world history. Picture it for yourself. Out of a clear sky, one day (and night, because it involved the whole Earth in the same instant) a voice came from outer space, from Mars, and introduced us to a form of life our scientists had always claimed was a member of the lichen family, but which actually was a lot more human than you are. What we had thought was the lowest form of mossback, was actually the highest human civilization in the solar system. Wedgewood china, suspension bridges, and hot dogs

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were old stuff thirty thousand years ago with the Martians. They were really advanced. And when we understood it (most of us, that is) we felt mighty flattered to think that they were going to try to rub some of it off on us.

Actually the Big Show idea was a good one. Their psychologists had studied us, and had decided that the best way to educate us was the painless way—by entertaining us. They knew how TV fascinated us. They noted our bowed shoulders, our kinked necks, our TV squint. What more natural thing than to put on the biggest TV show of all, and at the same time take the bow out of our shoulders, the kink out of our necks, and restore the focus of our eyes to the natural one of infinity? The whole sky was going to become one gigantic television screen, in perfect focus, in full (how full we never imagined until we saw it!) color, and in Three-D.

This Big Show, they said, was going to come in like cosmic rays, from every direction, but seeming to focus directly overhead. Every seat in the house would be the best seat in the house. You were the entire audience, sitting in the one seat, surrounded from horizon to zenith by the entire stage. The Earth's EMF, they said, was a perfect lens shape —and it formed a perfect focus on the center of the Earth. The atmosphere was a perfect lens also, because it was governed by, and in fact owed its existence, as did the entire Earth, to the EMF.

Ever stop to think that it's the EMF that makes the direction exactly opposite to your feet the direction we call up, no matter where we stand on Earth? To a Chinese, up is the other way. It's the EMF does that. The EMF, expressing itself as gravity. There really isn't anything called gravity, as an entity. The EMF is the entity, and gravity is one of its legs. Magnetism is the other. Maybe the only way you could describe the EMF would be to call it the body. And nobody knows what the head is!

The egotist who thinks he is the center of the universe may be right after all. Except that he's not alone. Everybody else is at the center too!

Not that Edith Miller was ego-centric. She was beautiful, yes, but not ego-centric. She was not only beautiful, but she was private secretary to Herman Fendler, head of the new NBC-CBS Big Show Merger. It was quite true that

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she would not have been secretary had she not been beautiful. After all, it's what you see on TV that counts, and the bosses never let that fact get very far out of their minds. Anything that couldn't go before a camera, didn't go in TV, *anywhere*. Edith went *everywhere*. She was the kind of a girl who, when you saw her, you wanted to see more—and you cursed the "things as they are" that made it impossible. It just wasn't fair, was the thought that instantly suggested itself as you saw enough to realize there was much more.

That was the thought that Roy Mallory usually carried in his mind as he went about his business of Production and Coordination. And sometimes it effected his coordination, but never his production. As a TV producer, he was tops. And now, the youngest man in the sharpest of all businesses, he was assigned to handle the biggest "spectacular" of them all. To give you an idea of how highly regarded he was, having given him the assignment, Herman Fendler also gave him his secretary—but strictly on loan.

Roy's face was flushed as he walked back to his office, Edith beside him, Fendler's words still ringing in his ears.

"The Big Show!" he breathed. "Wow!"

"Not too big for you," said Edith.

"Not with you to handle the details," he returned, gallantly.

"That will be wise," she said.

"Huh?" he said.

"To let me do all the handling."

He flushed a different kind of flush now. "What makes you think . . ."

"The look on your face when Mr. Fendler said you could have me. I've seen that look hundreds of times, and it always means the same thing."

"But . . ." he protested.

"We understand each other perfectly, don't we?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes. We have our desks in separate offices."

"No we don't. I intend to sit with my desk directly opposite you so I can keep my eye on you at all times. Mr. Fendler gave me the job of seeing that you do your job, and I'm going to do it."

"Sadist," he snapped.

"Of course," she agreed. "But can I help it?"

He looked at her, and sud-

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denly he grinned. "No, you can't. But with you sitting across from me, that realization won't lessen my sufferings any."

"It won't be so bad," she said. "You can look."

"You *are* a sadist!" he exclaimed.

The Big Show opened with a commercial. Roy and Edith were sitting atop the roof of the central studio, relaxing in contour chairs. Roy's chair adjusted to his figure comfortably as he leaned back, but Edith's found the task impossible. She squirmed about until Roy glanced at her and remarked: "Why don't you give up? The chair isn't made that can fit those curves. You've just got too much of a good thing, that's all."

"It isn't the chair," she said, "it's that commercial. Just look at it!"

Roy stared at the huge box of breakfast food that loomed across the entire sky.

"The sponsor is probably delirious with joy," he said. "Did you ever see such color, and such sharpness of focus? It's so vivid you can almost reach right up and touch it. It's *really* there, not a picture!"

"But what a thing to open the most important historical event of all time—the establishment of visual communication with another planet!"

"I get what you mean," said Roy. "But if you don't stop squirming, I'll find myself unable to concentrate on the Big Show."

Footsteps behind them announced the late arrival of Herman Fendler, and he literally hurled himself into his contour chair as he puffed: "Stupendous! Utterly stupendous! And to think that we've got the contract for these commercials!"

Now the scene changed, and it was Fendler himself, announcing the Big Show. Fendler beamed as his own voice rolled out of the sky, sonorous and dignified and with the clarity of a golden bell, slightly amalgamated with bronze.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the world. We bring you now the Big Show. The sensational Martian television broadcast of the Pageant of Life as it is lived on Mars. It is with great pride that we announce that through the combined efforts of NBC-CBS we bring you the most historic event in television history, or in the Earth's history, for that matter.

"You all know how the Martians first communicated

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with us from space. You all heard the voice that came to us so unexpectedly. But now, at last, we can see as well as hear! For the first time you will see our fellow men and women from Mars, enacting before you the glorious pageant of their 35,000 year history.

"It is through this history that they hope to acquaint you with themselves, so that we can go on through the future as brother worlds, understanding each other, respecting each other, loving each other. It is true that our Martian brothers are far advanced over us, in the mechanics of civilization as well as the moral values. It is also true that as we watch, we will be forced to revise many of our own standards, but all for the better. It is the fond hope of the Martians, and of the many among us who are concerned with our future development, the governments, the churches, the universities, that we will be speeded up along the path of civilization upon which the Martians have so long trod.

"Let us pray that what we see now, and in the days to follow, nay, the weeks and months, for it will be a pageant of tremendous length to show the history of 35,000 years, will be as a leaven to enlarge our lives, and catapult us into a higher development that can enrich us beyond our dreams.

"My fellow men, I give you —the Martians!"

A burst of applause followed, and Fendler beamed. "You think of everything, my boy," he approved. "Makes the show seem more live."

Roy looked at Edith and snorted, almost inaudibly. She looked back. "No matter what you think," she whispered, "I can tell you he expected it, and your name would be mud if you hadn't included it. Don't let it go to your head."

"That's right," whispered Roy sarcastically. "Look out for me like a mother."

Another voice came now, and with it the face of the first Martian ever seen on Earth.

Edith gasped for breath. "He's *beautiful!*"

The wind sagged out of Roy's sails, "Oh, no!" he groaned. "The last thing I expected—competition!"

"Not at all," said Edith. "You never had a chance!"

"He'll never lay a hand on you," said Roy maliciously. "Unless he can do it over TV."

"If he could, I think I'd

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let him," returned Edith sweetly.

"Your cruelty is savage beyond comprehension," growled Roy. "Why don't you jump off the roof . . ." His voice trailed away as he listened to the Martian.

"Fellow men and women of Earth," came the voice, exquisitely clear and cultured. "We are happy to present ourselves to you. In order that you may know us completely, we will begin with what we on Mars consider the most important facet of our lives—the family. The next thing you will see is a Martian wedding, which is really the beginning of living on Mars. Until the day a Martian man and woman join themselves as a family, to begin the wonderful task of continuing the race, it cannot be said that they have really been alive, but only going through the first faint stirrings of life as it really is. Look now upon a Martian wedding day."

As the voice faded away, the face of the Martian, which had filled the whole sky, began to recede, and as it did so, his shoulders came into view, his bronzed chest, his perfectly formed arms, his gleaming nude torso . . .

"Oh, my goodness!" screamed Edith, sitting erect in her chair. "Oh, my goodness!"

"He's stark naked!" roared Fendler. "Mallory, he's nude as a jaybird!"

"So I see," said Roy uncomfortably. "Rather makes the classical sculptures of the ancient Greeks seem crude by comparison, doesn't he?"

"Eh?" said Fendler. "Oh . . . yes, he . . . does . . . I see what you mean. But . . ." he subsided and relaxed in his chair, because now the figure had vanished. "Classical art, personified. Great artists, those Martians must be . . ."

Roy looked covertly at Edith, who was trembling and trying to compose herself as she too returned to her reclining position.

"Eight, nine, ten," he muttered.

"What did you say?" asked Edith faintly, her composure returning.

"Just counting myself out," said Roy sadly. "If that's what it takes, I'm long gone."

Once more the gigantic television screen of the sky came to life, and this time Roy Mallory sat erect. "This is more like it!" he exclaimed with renewed interest.

The scene was a great cathedral-like building, with the rays of the sun streaming redly through fantastically

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carved windows that seemed made of diamonds. Walking straight toward them came a young woman, smiling radiantly, and bearing in her arms a large bouquet of the most vivid and exotic flowers Roy had ever seen. Except for the flowers she wore absolutely nothing other than a gold band around her forehead, in the center of which was a gigantic, blood-red ruby.

Standing on both sides were long rows of smiling men and women, two by two, and in common with the girl who advanced down the aisle between them, they were all completely naked.

"One thing seems certain," said Fendler. "Clothing is unknown on Mars. I hadn't suspected, but I suppose it would be best to make nothing of it."

"Exactly, Mr. Fendler," said Roy. "God created man and woman in the Garden of Eden, unclothed, and it was only the warping effect of sin in their minds that made them wear clothing. Obviously on Mars this either never happened, or they have returned to godliness and purity."

"You're right, my boy," said Fendler, beginning to beam again. And this time he beamed with distinct pleasure. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Terrific!" said Roy.

"The flowers are lovely," said Edith bravely. "She carries them so gracefully."

"Flowers?" said Roy absently. "Oh, yes, flowers. Very nice. Geraniums, aren't they? Look! She's giving them to the audience!"

"There's the groom," said Fendler. "My . . . she's a lucky girl!"

Edith threw the executive a look that should have made him sink through the roof, but he didn't see it. She returned her gaze quickly to the heavens and tried to stare composedly. Once again she found it difficult to find a comfortable position in her chair.

For long minutes the three (along with every other person on Earth) watched the ensuing ceremony, which was simple, direct, noble and uplifting. Background music that began as a murmur, grew until it became a virtual pæan of joy as the young Martian couple announced their eternal vows in ringing tones. Then, before the assembled audience, they removed their golden circlets from about their heads, and exchanged them. Obviously this completed the wedding ceremony, for now they clasped their arms

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around each other and kissed, long and tenderly.

"It is . . . lovely," said Edith wistfully.

Now the young couple, arm in arm, advanced slowly up a few steps toward an ornate couch, around which burned candles with flames of a color never seen on Earth.

"Eh?" said Fendler. He leaned forward anxiously.

"Oh!" said Edith, her hand flying to her mouth as though to stifle any further outburst.

"Ah!" said Roy.

The couple advanced to the couch and sat down upon it. A moment of incredulous silence was broken as Fendler leaped to his feet. "Mallory!" he roared. "Get that show off the air! Cut the power! Smash the cameras! Do anything! The FCC will murder us!"

"There's no power to cut," said Roy. "This isn't our show —remember. Just the commercials."

"Then put on a commercial! Hurry, man!"

"Right in the middle of the show?" asked Roy. "Besides, *they* control the commercials too. Immediately after this scene, as I understand it, they'll put on the breakfast cereal again. And it will be rather well-timed, I'd say . . ."

Edith rose to her feet, her face flaming. "You've got to do *something*. . . ."

"I don't know what," said Roy, looking at the sky intently. "Besides, isn't this what they got married for?" He settled himself more comfortably.

Fendler turned and raced from the roof. "Somebody turn that thing off!" he screamed. His voice floated back to Roy and Edith on the roof. It died away in the recesses of the building.

"Nobody can turn it off," said Roy. "And it's going to go on for months . . ."

"For months!" exclaimed Edith, horrified. She cast a glance upward, then turned away, clenching her fists, and biting her lips.

"What's the matter?" asked Roy. "Can't you take it?"

She stamped her foot. "Roy Mallory, you say one more word, and I'll . . ."

Roy shrugged. "I'm surprised at you. Offhand, I'd say the Martians were highly advanced, sensible, uninhibited, pretty wonderful human beings. At least they know what they're living for. Maybe it would do you good to watch."

Edith looked up momentarily at the sky, then lowered her gaze swiftly. "I . . . I can't!" she whispered. Then she too ran from the roof and

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disappeared down the stairway.

Roy looked after her a moment, then shrugged and returned to his contour chair and settled himself deeply into it.

As the Big Show went on, he had no idea of the turmoil that was sweeping the world. It was only when the day's performance was over and he went down to his office that he got his first inkling. It consisted of the discovery that he had been fired—at the request of a certain breakfast cereals company.

By noon the next day every sponsor who had signed up for the Big Show had cancelled their contracts, and by midnight it became painfully obvious that although the contracts could easily be cancelled, it was not equally easy to cancel the show. That night the Big Show went on, depicting more of the family life of the Martians, taking Earth viewers through a typical day of a Martian couple on the day of the birth of their first child. To many of those who watched the show, it offered a tremendous fascination; but to others, more squeamish and unable to face the naked realities, both of the flesh and of the business of giving birth to a baby, neither of which spared any detail in their presentation, it was an experience past their ability to endure.

However, as one prominent physician said: "*This* is the way a baby should be born! Every woman on Earth can take a lesson from what we have just seen . . . if they did we'd have little use for doctors, psychiatrists or psychologists. This is the miracle of birth as it was meant to be."

It was the unfortunate sponsor who made the loudest noise, though. His screams were heard the world over. His brand of beer, spoken of in such glowing terms before and after the broadcast, wasn't worth a nickel after the Martians did a re-run of the show depicting how the birth would have gone if the mother had been a drunkard. Now, indeed, were there faintings and mental blowups among the populace. The scene *was* rather ghastly. Some thought the Martians had overdone it, but as the president of the W.C.T.U. remarked triumphantly: "Exactly what we've been saying for decades!"

At midnight the FCC suspended the license of the NBC-CBS Big Show Merger, and Herman Fendler himself

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lost his job. Along with him, of course, Edith Miller became unemployed, although no woman in that category could claim to be more beautifully unemployed.

Roy Mallory, visiting his office to remove some of his personal belongings, found her emptying her own desk.

"Oh," he said. "Another casualty?"

"You read the papers, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I heard of the FCC closing the networks up. But it hasn't stopped the show. Tonight, you know, is the Martian version of what they do for entertainment. I suppose we'll be watching that happy young couple going out on the town and doing it up brown, or buff, as you might say . . ."

"*You* will be watching," Edith cut in acidly. "I have no doubt at all. As for me . . ."

"Certainly I'll be watching. That doll is almost as beautiful as you are, and I keep thinking how nice it would be if we were on Mars."

"We're not," she said. "And we won't ever be."

"Alas!" he said glumly. "And alack!"

"You're as funny as a crutch," she said, stuffing the last of her belongings into her bag. "You ought to get yourself a job as a comedian."

"Oh, I've already got a job," he said airily.

"Oh?"

"Yes."

She stood there, poised as if to leave, but not actually translating the poise into action.

"Where?" she asked, setting down her bag with a defiant slam.

"I could use a good secretary," he said.

"Tell me where you're working," she demanded impatiently.

"I'm starting my own business in television producing," he said. "And I'll never make it go without a competent secretary, and . . ." he put his hands behind his back, ". . . look, no hands."

"I'll take the job," she said. "And what are you doing for your first show?"

"Give me time," he grinned. "I just this minute started the new company."

"I thought so," she said calmly. "Well, how about the Big Show?"

"The Big Show!"

"Why not?"

"Who'll we get for a sponsor?" he asked sarcastically.

"How about Sunbathing Magazine?" she suggested.

He looked at her wide-eyed.

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"Sunbathing Magazine!" he gasped.

"Of course. With all this publicity, their circulation will zoom to the moon, if they just grab it—and it's up to you to see that they do!"

"Baby," he said wonderingly, "I just don't know how to take you."

"Don't try it," she said, picking up a letter-knife and toying with it.

Exactly one week later the Martians dropped all their previously scheduled commercials, and put on the first of the new commercials. As Roy Mallory reclined in the contour chair atop the roof of his newly rented office, Edith Miller suddenly appeared at his side and looked around.

"Where's my chair?" she asked.

He leaped to his feet. "I didn't think you cared to watch the Big Show," he said. "I only ordered one chair. You're always yelling about extravagance . . ."

"All right," she said. "I'll sit on the parapet."

"You'll get a stiff neck."

"I've already got one," she said.

"I'll say you have," he said disgustedly. "But why not forget all that? This chair is big enough for two."

"I don't need this job that bad."

He grunted and sat down in the chair again. "Okay. But tell me if your neck does get stiff—I'll change off with you, fifty-fifty."

"Fair enough," she said.

The show began, and there was silence on the roof. Edith watched calmly, and Roy divided his attention between watching her and the show. As the show progressed, it became obvious that the script was perfect for the new sponsor.

"We'll make a million on that percentage agreement," said Edith.

"Two million," said Roy. "I think I'll make you a partner for that bit of masterminding."

"Keep it," she said. "And by the way, isn't that the roof of the Sunbathing Magazine building over there?"

"Yes."

"And isn't that the editorial staff of Sunbathing Magazine out on the roof watching the show?"

"Yes."

"And aren't they in the buff, as you so crudely put it, in spite of the fact the sun isn't out?"

Roy sat up in his chair and looked sharply at the roof in question. In the vivid light

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from the sky-pictures, which now were showing a happy couple soaring fantastically in a Martian equivalent of the aerial gadgets of Coney Island, still unimpeded by the briefest of entangling garments, it was quite obvious that the editorial staff of Sunbathing Magazine was indeed buffing it.

"They're pretty modern over there," he said. "You can't blame them for practicing what they preach."

"But isn't this an innovation?"

"I believe so. Usually they limit their activities to private camps."

"I heard today that there were new teenage clubs being formed, patterned after the Big Show," said Edith.

"Clubs?"

"Yes. The police arrested a whole group of them in Sandusky, Ohio, for stripping off their clothes during a local hop."

"That's not so good," said Roy.

"Oh, I don't know. They weren't really doing anything wrong."

Roy almost choked. "Nothing wrong . . ."

"No. They were conducting the whole affair on a highly moral plane. The police let them go, and dismissed the case when their parents showed up and suggested that it was all rather natural, and that they felt no harm had been done."

"The parents said that?" asked Roy incredulously.

Weeks passed, and the Big Show went on. The audience, which had always been huge, now became almost universal. And no longer were there any remarks about nudity, but instead "sunbathing" groups began springing up everywhere. For a time this development, which began to edge its way into public places with an accelerated pace, rather than private camps, stirred up another storm, and there were demands that Sunbathing Magazine be banned from the newsstands. This fell through when the authorities pointed out the magazine was tame compared to the show in the heavens.

Then one day Edith handed the phone to Roy with the remark: "Another sponsor."

"Who?" asked Roy in surprise.

"The League of Decency," said Edith. "Something about if they can't lick them, to join them." There was a peculiar look in her eyes as Roy took the phone and leaned back in his swivel chair to

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talk. When he had finished he turned back to Edith and said: "Baby, I've got a hunch that it won't be long before the only use the people on this Earth will have for clothing will be for protection from the elements—which after all, are not as temperate on Earth as they are on Mars, with its scientifically controlled weather."

"You may be right," she said. She busied herself with her filing cabinet.

That night as Roy lay back on the roof-chair watching the Martian version of a musical show, which several weeks ago would have seemed tremendously daring, it stirred scarcely a flicker in his nervous system. It was in the middle of the ballet, wherein lovely Martian girls soared about on twinkling toes gloriously nude, bathed only in incredibly exotic color symphonies played on them by a master color organist, that Roy heard the soft pad of footsteps beside him. He heard Edith seat herself in her chair, but paid no attention, so engrossed was he in the spectacle before him. But as he lay there, something nagged at the back of his mind disturbingly, and all at once it hit him.

Edith's footsteps had had the unmistakable slap of bare feet . . .

For an instant he lay there frozen, then he turned his head with a jerk. Edith was lying in her contour chair, composedly looking at the Big Show. And she was as naked as the day she was born!

He sat up angrily. "This is going too far!" he exploded.

Edith turned to him in wonderment, her eyes wide. "What?" she gasped. "That's certainly a strange reaction, coming from you!"

"You're as buff as a billiard ball!" he said indignantly his face growing red.

"I don't think I look like a billiard ball," she said. "I've always been under the impression I was rather nice looking. Neither square, nor perfectly round. Just nicely curved . . ."

"Your sadism has gone too far this time!" he snapped. "I don't appreciate it at all. You can sit here and moon-bath if you want to, I'm going downstairs and work . . ."

He began to stride toward the roof entrance.

"What's the matter, can't you take it?" she called after him.

He whirled. "If it'll satisfy your sadistic little mind," he

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said, "I can't! Now, are you pleased with yourself?"

She looked hurt. "Who's being a sadist?" she said. She stood up and came toward him.

He grew giddy and for a moment the roof whirled around him. Then all at once he found himself lying on the roof, and his head cradled on her lap. He looked up at her.

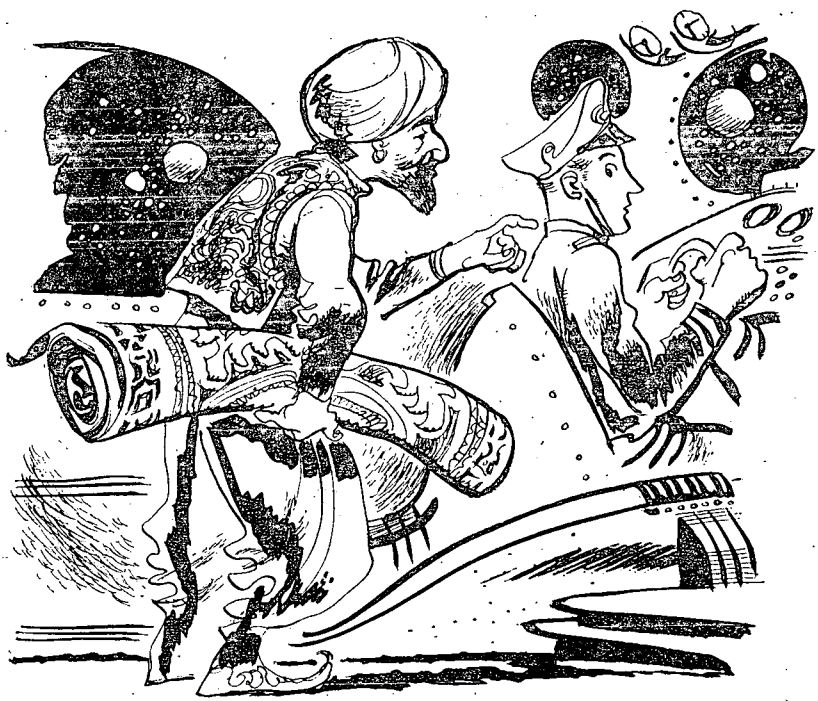
"You aren't being a sadist?" he persisted.

"Of course not," she said. "After all, the Martians are thirty thousand years ahead of us, and if it's all right with them . . . who am I to be backward?"

"Baby," he said, drawing her lips down to his, "you've been ahead of them all the time!"

And all over the Earth mankind took a gigantic step forward, into a new Eden that promised many good things. . . .

THE END



"Pardon me, which way is east?"

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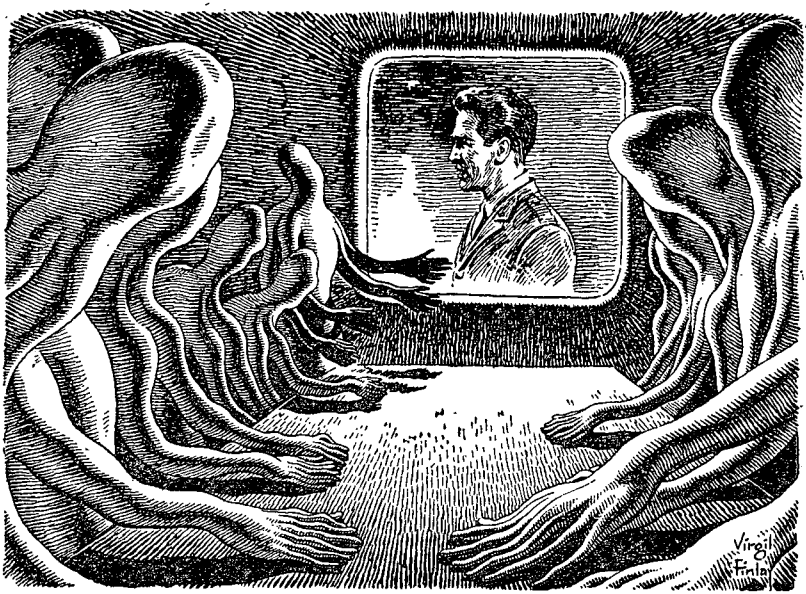

Space Brat

By O. H. LESLIE

The aliens' invasion plan was logical. To conquer Man, they reasoned, you start with Baby and work up.

MR. GERTZ slapped his forehead in vexation, and his wife, Emma, shifted in their double bed and said: "Louie, for heaven's sake. Go to sleep!"

"Sleep?" Mr. Gertz mocked her speech. "What are you, kidding? How can I go to sleep with that brat next door screamin' its head off?"

"It's only a baby. What do you expect?"

"I expect a little peace and quiet!"

"Poor little thing," she murmured.

Mr. Gertz grumbled.

The baby cried on.

Athra, Chairman of the War Council of Nahrla, squatted on the blood-red cushion and twisted the plastic features of his eyeless face into a portrait of contempt and im-

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patience. He had listened silently to the arguments and counter-arguments of the council members, and only until their shrill, strident voices had grown tired of the useless debate did he speak. And when he spoke, they listened.

"Fools!" he said harshly. "Seven orbits has the sun made of Nahrla. Do you think Jeheera has waited this long to make its plans?"

A murmur went up at the mention of the hated name. Jeheera, their planetary neighbor, had hurled its declaration of war seven Nahrla-years ago. Still, the major preparations for the battle were not underway. The battlefield had been chosen: a distant world on the rim of the great nebula, a world whose green land areas and wide seas most resembled the terrain of the two combatants. It was traditional for Nahrla and Jeheera to fight on other worlds; through countless centuries, they had learned the bitter outcome of war on their own soil. Jointly, their exploratory forces had searched the galaxies for the scene of their next conflict. They had decided upon the planet called Earth by its inhabitants, and fixed the date of the engagement for forty years hence—a generation to the short-lived creatures of the green world, but only a brief span to the people of Nahrla.

"Forty years!" Athra rasped. "Seven gone already. And still we sit in idle quarrel, without our defenses prepared. Do you realize the consequence of such inaction? Do you not suppose that Jeheera has already sent its agents to this world, to scout out its population, its ways, its weaknesses, its dangers and pitfalls? And what have *we* learned? What information do our scouts supply?"

At the end of the hall, a figure arose, bowing humbly, its four jointless arms wrapped about its narrow body.

"If I may report, sir," he said quietly.

The council members turned to the speaker.

"You may speak, Shura," the chairman said.

The figure bowed again. "As captain of the exploratory force of Nahrla, it is my duty to point out the nature of the problem we face on this new battleground. This is no ordinary world we have chosen. Its inhabitants are strange and unpredictable. They are alternately peace-loving and warlike, wise and stupid, courageous and cowardly, noble and selfish. There is lit-

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tle consistency in their actions or emotions. But there is one aspect of their nature which is common to all."

"And what is that?"

"Suspicion. A lack of trust in each other's motives. And that is why our problem has been so difficult, sir. We would have sent our agent among them many orbits ago, if we could have decided upon what form the agent should adopt."

Shura slithered across the polished floor of the council room and stopped before the Reading Screen at the right of the chairman's pillow. He flipped the switch that started the screen glowing.

"Here is what the Earth-race calls a Man."

A gasp of revulsion swept the room at the image that appeared on the screen.

"In addition to his unattractiveness," Shura said, "the Man is a relatively ineffective creature. As an individual, he is usually inclined to be emotionally unstable, petty, given to a sense of self-importance, greedy, acquisitive, slothful, and often cruel. At times, he is capable of unselfish and even noble actions, but even these are questioned by his fellow-creatures as having hidden, base motivations. If our agent were to take the form of this Man, his ability to uncover the type of information we seek would be hampered by the same distrust that affects all men of the planet Earth. Therefore, we cannot recommend, in all honesty, that we despatch an agent bearing this shape to scout this battlefield."

The chairman grunted. "Then what shape do you recommend, Shura?"

The figure shrugged. "We have considered several others. There are many types of organic creatures on this world, some of them more trusted by Man than Man himself. This shape, for example."

He flicked the switch. A four-legged creature, blanketed with shaggy fur, with a long nose and pointed ears, appeared on the Reading Screen.

"This is what they call Dog. Dog is considered by the Earth-race as Man's Best Friend. He accompanies Man everywhere, and told many confidences, even though he has no ability to speak or comprehend. He is well cared-for, often pampered. And most important, he is usually trusted implicitly."

"And this is the shape you recommend?"

Shura sighed. "No. Unfortunately, Dog's actions are

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limited by the master's. They are allowed little freedom of action. If Dog becomes independent of Man, they declare it Wild, and treat it as a beast of the field."

The chairman slapped at his pillow with his seven-fingered hand.

"Get to the point, Shura! I do not wish to hear what shapes you do *not* recommend. I wish a positive answer to our problem!"

"We have one," Shura said.

The councilmen murmured.

"Here is the shape we recommend, after careful study. It is the shape of Man, but Man in the dawn of his innocence. The only shape in which all of the inhabitants of this planet give their complete faith and trust."

He flicked the switch again.

Athra, the chairman, stared at the bloated, pink, ugly thing on the Screen, and looked disgusted.

"What in Nahrla's name is *that?*"

"That," Shura said, "is what the Earth-race calls a Baby. Unlike ourselves, the Earth-creatures are mammals, bearing their young within the womb and expelling it after nine months of gestation. The creature that emerges is called a Baby, or Infant, and it undergoes a process of cell growth until it becomes an Earth-adult. But at no point in this entire growth process is the Earth-creature more adored, more pampered, and most important—more *trusted*—than the time when it bears the name of Baby."

"And this is your recommendation?"

"Yes, sir. There are drawbacks, of course. The Baby is a helpless thing at first, dependent upon human care. But it is this very helplessness which makes the Baby so acceptable to the Earth-race. Our agent would have to suffer a period of helplessness before he is able to perform his scouting duties, but the few lost years will be well worth the outcome. He will be completely accepted into Earth-society. He will be one of them—not an alien stranger, unused to their ways and customs and mores. He will grow up as a normal member of the Earth-race. Then, when the proper moment comes, he will be in the best of positions to blueprint our new battlefield, in astonishing detail."

From the corner of the room, Lotha, the ex-chairman of the Nahrla War Council, twisted his features bitterly and said:

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"And just how does Shura propose to introduce this agent to the planet? Can we place him in the very womb of some Earth-creature?"

"No," Shura said. "That cannot be done. But infiltrating an agent in the form of a human Baby will be no problem. The Earth-creatures readily accept Babies, without question as to parentage or identity. There are thousands of such Babies born every day on the planet, and special institutions have ben created for their care,"

Lotha growled. "It's ridiculous. Too elaborate. I prefer the direct approach."

"That is our recommendation," Shura said stiffly. "I suggest we put it up to a council vote."

The chairman nodded in assent.

"Shura is right. The Council will vote on the proposal. All those in favor, will please raise their fourth hand."

* * *

Mrs. Purdy, of the Delafield Adoption Agency, smiled toothily at the young couple seated in front of her desk.

"I'm always happy to deliver such good news," she said. "I know how long you two have been waiting, but now I think your prayers have been answered."

Jane Bryan caught her breath sharply.

"Oh, Mrs. Purdy! You mean—"

"Yes, my dear. It isn't often that we are able to find just the infant our prospective parents have requested. But Fate has been good to you both. Recently, our agency was fortunate enough to receive a foundling infant boy. He's a perfect darling—just about a month old, blue eyes, blond hair, and an absolute charmer."

Jane's husband, Dan, reached over to grip his wife's hand.

"You really mean it, Mrs. Purdy?"

"I certainly do. Naturally, you were one of the first couples I thought of when the baby was brought here. The poor little thing was abandoned on our very doorstep; it was like a gift from Heaven. Now, all we have to do is complete a few minor formalities—"

Jane couldn't help herself. The tears started in her pretty green eyes, and she fumbled helplessly in her purse for her handkerchief. Dan got up and went to her. He put her head on his shoulder, and let her weep in happiness and relief. Mrs. Purdy watched them, her eyes tender.

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"Can we see him?" Dan asked. "Can we see our baby now, Mrs. Purdy?"

"Of course. Come right this way."

Jane dried her eyes, and they left the office together. But her tears began to flow again as they approached the crib on the second floor of the adoption agency. Her arms went out impulsively toward the child that lay in peaceful slumber on the sheet.

"Oh, he's adorable!" Jane breathed. "Oh, Dan, he's just what we always wanted!"

"How soon?" Dan said tightly. "How soon, Mrs. Purdy?"

"Just a few days. We'll work as swiftly as we can, Mr. Bryan. In a few days, you can take your new baby home."

The few days turned out to be a week. Then the phone rang in the Bryan household, and Mrs. Purdy's cheerful voice said:

"Today's the day!"

At five o'clock on a Monday afternoon, Jane Bryan carried her new son across the threshold of their apartment.

At two o'clock, the baby set up a hungry howl, and Dan Bryan stirred and sat up in bed.

"Wake up," he said to his wife.

"What is it?"

"That damn thing is sure screaming its head off. I don't think I can wait. I think we ought to take care of it now."

"But how can we?" his wife said. "It would look suspicious, wouldn't it?"

"What if it does? We can move out of here tomorrow, see another part of the world."

"But Lotha warned us to be careful—"

"Lotha!" Dan Bryan said, his lips curled. "Why should we listen to anything *he* says? We take our orders directly from Jeheera, not from a dirty Nahrlan traitor. I say tonight."

"Whatever you say, dear," his wife answered.

Mr. Gertz looked at the bedside clock, moaned, and punched his pillow angrily.

"That lousy brat!" he said. "Why doesn't somebody shut him up?"

His request was answered. With abrupt suddenness, the baby's pitiful cry ended.

"There," Mrs. Gertz said comfortably. "I told you, Louie. The poor thing was only hungry. Now go to sleep."

Mr. Gertz rolled over. He dozed off quickly, now that the night was still, and slept with the innocence of a babe.

THE END

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EXCITEMENT FOR SALE

By STEPHEN WILDER

Suppose a salesman knocked at your door and said: "I'm selling happiness—any kind your heart desires. Every shape, size or description—and the price is right." Would you know instantly the thing you wanted above all else? Maybe you'd better think it over in advance. The salesman might turn up any day.

MARY-JEAN closed the cover of the current *Woman's Home Journal* with a little sigh and walked into the kitchen to put a light under the stew she was cooking for supper. One thing about Tom, she thought—Tom was her husband — there was no problem with leftovers because Tom liked stew.

But there out to be a law, Mary-Jean thought, against such magazines as *Woman's Home Journal.* She sighed again, remembering the many stories she had read to pass the afternoon hours, as if, despite the careful pattern and routine of the household chores, killing time was still the most important function of the housewife.

There ought to be a law, all right. The heroine in the first story Mary-Jean had read went off to Caracas, Venezuela, in search of petroleum with her husband. The heroine of the second story was an Army nurse stationed in divided, exotic, intrigue-filled Berlin. The heroine of the third, Mary-Jean thought dreamily, had spent a memorable summer with the son of a fabulously wealthy Oriental potentate in Shalimar, Kashmir.

Mary-Jean went upstairs to take her daily shower, still thinking of Shalimar, Kashmir. The Vale of a Thousand Delights, it was called. Do I have one? thought Mary-Jean. Just one genuine delight like the girls in those stories? Oh, there's Tom: Tom's good natured, but an accountant. An accountant. She shuddered

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slightly as she got ready for her shower. And Tommy, Jr., aged seven. But Tommy, Jr., showed every sign of being a normal, everyday boy who would grow up into a normal, workaday man like his father.

Sighing again, Mary-Jean stripped before her mirror for the daily scrutiny preparatory to showering. I'm only twenty-eight, she thought. No sags in the wrong places. No excess fat and no gawky bones sticking out, either. But let's face it, Mary-Jean, you're no raving beauty. You're just a normal, plain, supposedly well-adusted housewife who—

Who has been waiting every minute of every day of her life, Mary-Jean thought with unexpected bitterness, for something thrilling to happen to her. Only, it never did. There was the dulling, oddly frightening hand of routine, and nothing else. No Vale of a Thousand Delights, Mary-Jean thought, and laughed at her own unexpected, childish pipedreams.

She had already stepped into the glass-enclosed shower stall when the door chimes rang pleasantly through the house. Momentarily she debated answering or pretending she wasn't home. But even a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman would break the routine with his chatter, she decided, and slipped into a dressing gown on her way downstairs.

Tom, who had a do-it-yourself workshop in the basement, had installed an ingenious one-way looking slot in the front door sidelight, and Mary-Jean used this now to see who her visitor was. She frowned, almost regretting her impulse to answer the door.

A little old man stood outside, holding an enormous suitcase. He was obviously a peddler. He was a rotund little man with a cheerful-enough face, red-cheeked, eyes sparkling and an incongruous little rosebud pout of a mouth under a long—make that, Mary-Jean observed, an incredibly long nose. He wore nondescript clothing—except for the hat. The hat was one of those sporty Tyrolean things which went so well with the tweeds and the college set. Yet oddly, the natty headpiece did not seem out of place on the rotund little man's head.

Suddenly the little old man did a curious thing. He smiled at Mary-Jean. Smiled at her through the one-way glass. It could not be, she told herself, a coincidence. He was smiling

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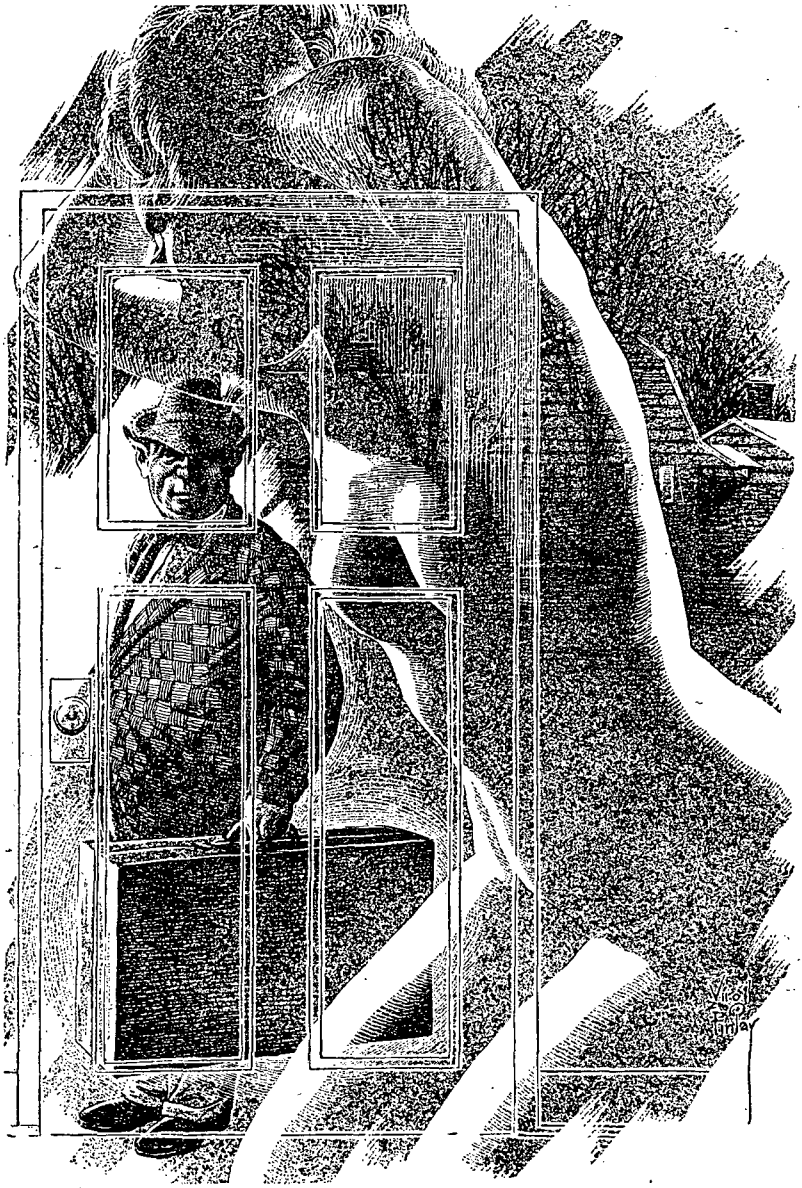

He was a mood-merchant, a-happiness-huckster, peddling dreams from door to door.

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right at her, smiling eye-to-eye, as it were, although he could not possibly see through the one-way glass. He removed the Tyrolean hat from a round bald dome of a head and executed a little bow. Mary-Jean fought down a crazy impulse to curtsey and instead opened the door with a quick, almost an angry motion. Her heart was pounding.

"You called, madam?" the little old man demanded in a chirp of a voice. Chirp was the only word Mary-Jean could think of. The little old man sounded just like a bird.

"Called?" Mary-Jean said in some confusion as the rotund peddler brought his enormous suitcase into the living room and unsnapped it on the sofa before Mary-Jean could stop him. There was an ironclad, if unwritten rule, in Mary-Jean's household: nothing unclean ever visited that sofa. And the little peddler's bag looked as if it had spent time in every sooty waiting room from here to—Shalimar, Kashmir.

"Not five minutes ago, you called," the peddler chirped. "Here I am. Now then, what will it be?" As he spoke, the peddler had arranged the enormous suitcase, now open, like a showcase. For some reason she could not fathom, Mary-Jean felt an unexpected thrill of fear clutch icily at her spine.

"You can show me whatever it is you're selling," Mary-Jean heard herself saying. "But please let's get one thing straight. I didn't call. I didn't send for you. You must be a cold-canvasser. Aren't you?"

The peddler rubbed plump hands together, shaking his head. "We Happiness Salesmen never canvass without being called."

"Hap-happiness salesmen?"

"I—" here the peddler returned the Tyrolean hat rakishly to his bald head—"am a Happiness Salesman."

"But what—exactly what—do you sell? Can I see?" Mary-Jean asked, edging toward the enormous suitcase.

"Specifically?" chirped the peddler.

"I—I can't seem to see anything in your bag. That's strange."

It certainly was strange, Mary-Jean thought. The suitcase was crowded with various items, she could sense that. Yet try as she might to see them, an eerie kind of haze seemed to be hanging over the suitcase. She could see nothing through it. Absolutely nothing.

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"Naturally," said the peddler. "But to answer your question. I sell people."

"No. I don't want to know whom you sell. I want to know *what* you sell to them."

"I told you, madam. I made it quite clear. I sell people."

"People?"

"People."

"Really, if this is some kind of an elaborate sales pitch—"

"May I ask you a question, madam?"

Almost, Mary-Jean was disappointed. It was coming now. After the snappy beginning to hook her interest, the sales routine was sinking into its familiar pattern. Are you satisfied with your present vacuum cleaner, madam? Did you know that I am the new Fillstrip Brushman in your community? Have you ever thought of owning your own encyclopedia, for when the children grow up? I have here in this suitcase, madam . . .

Mary-Jean nodded.

"When you were thinking, some ten minutes ago," said the little old man, "that it would be so nice if something unexpected, something thrilling, came into your life—did you have anything specific in mind?"

Mary-Jean's eyes widened and she felt the same icy fear race up her spine. How had the peddler known that? A shrewd guess because Mary-Jean looked like the typical late-twenties housewife who would be thinking such thoughts almost constantly? Or—something else, something Mary-Jean couldn't possibly explain. Instead of answering, she stood there open-mouthed as the peddler went on:

"Usually, it isn't anything specific. Usually, it's vague and general. Although—" here he smiled, revealing yellowed, wide-spaced teeth which made it look as if the healthy pink old-man's skin had been superimposed on a rotting skull—"although sometimes the specific nature of the daydream would startle you. When they're specific, though, they're atypical. I have had specific requests—granted, of course, for that is my function—for some mighty peculiar items. Are you interested? Come, come, are you interested?"

"In any peculiar—peculiar items, you mean?"

"Naturally."

"I'm interested in what's in your suitcase."

The peddler stood aside after making a flourish with his plump hands. Haze hung

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over the enormous suitcase like dense smoke.

"But I can't see anything," Mary-Jean protested as her curiosity got the better of her fright.

"Naturally you can't. Until you make your selection. You want something unusual, something unexpected to happen. You want to be lifted out of your humdrum life and given adventure, romance, a fling at the exotic and the improbable, an—"

"These are the things you sell?" Mary-Jean asked in disbelief.

"To women. Only to women such as yourself."

It was still a sales pitch, Mary-Jean told herself. An elaborate one, to be sure, but presently the peddler would come down to earth with the offer of some specific product, perhaps a beauty cream or perfume. Still, she had to admit that the strange haze over the open suitcase certainly was effective.

"What do you charge for selling—for selling a fling at the exotic, as you say?"

The peddler laughed. It was a birdlike sound, a chirping, twittering laugh. "Oh, no, my dear," he said, rocking with his laughter, "you don't understand. You've already paid."

"I already paid?"

"All your life, for every day of your life, you have paid. Every day you accepted the mundane and the humdrum, you have paid. You have paid a thousand times over."

"You mean I get this—this whatever it is you're selling—free of charge?"

"Very well. Call it that if you want. But shall we get down to business? I sell happiness. I sell happiness in the form of personal adornment."

Here it comes, Mary-Jean told herself. Personal adornment. Cosmetics? Jewelry? The pitch was coming down to earth.

"Personal adornments," the peddler went on, "to change your life, to remove it from the sphere of the humdrum, to—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, come to the point," Mary-Jean snapped irritably. She did not want to admit that she was disappointed because the peddler seemed to be coming out of the clouds of her pipe-dreams and down to earth.

"Personal adornments," the peddler went on, unconcerned, "which each and every still-young housewife, every victim of the mundane and prosaic, craves. For example, if I were to ask you what personal

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adornment, either general or specific, you craved the most, what would be your answer?

Mary-Jean perked up. There still was no beauty cream or hand-balm or one ounce of imported Parisian perfume. And there was, she had to admit, an intriguing question. Ordinarily, she found herself thinking, a girl would need days and days to decide on an answer to a question like that. But this wasn't ordinarily. This question had come on the heels of Mary-Jean's monthly reading of *Woman's Home Journal*. And what, Mary-Jean thought, did the young woman who had gone to Caracas, Venezuela, and the one who had been an Army nurse in divided Berlin, and the one who had spent a summer with the potentate's son in Shalimar, Kashmir—what did they all have in common? What was it they had which Mary-Jean so craved?

They attracted.

Attracted, she thought. And she did not merely mean attracted men, although that was part of it. To be sure, she told herself dreamily, all but forgetting the little peddler for the moment, sex appeal was a part of it, perhaps a considerable part. But it was by no means all. For Mary-Jean did not want to attract men for their sake alone. She was happily, if mundanely, married. Universal sex-appeal was, thus, an adjunct to what she wanted, but not the sum-total of it. Mary-Jean wanted to attract, all right. She wanted to attract like the Caracas girl or the Army nurse or the Shalimar girl, the girl of the Vale of a Thousand Delights.

She said, "You—you won't think I'm silly?"

"My dear lady! I consider no requests silly, I assure you."

"Well, I—I find it difficult to put into words."

"Try, dear lady. I have sold happiness to a thousand women like you over a thousand years."

"You *what?* What did you say?"

The peddler looked as if she had insulted him. He said, his chirp of a voice getting shriller still: "Did you actually think that I restricted my sale of happiness to one block—or perhaps one postal zone number—here in your city, here on this particular day on this particular yearly calendar? My dear lady! My very dear foolish lady, please tell me what it is you wish."

Mary-Jean blushed now that she had decided to go through with it, to bare her

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soul to this strange little peddler in a way that she had never bared it even to her own Tom, her husband, the sharer of and provider for her mundane existence. Still blushing, she said,

"I want to—to attract adventure. I—I want to be like a magnet for—a magnet for the iron filings of adventure! I want romance and exciting things to—to embrace me."

She clutched her throat wildly. The words had expressed her thoughts precisely, but they were not her own words. Or, more probably, they had come from her throat almost of their own volition.

And the little peddler laughed and laughed.

Mary-Jean felt suddenly crestfallen and strangely cheapened. She deserved this. She deserved his laughter. It was a new sales pitch, she had to admit that. The prospective buyer is made to practice self-mortification and then, to rid herself of the only witness of her shame, she buys almost anything.

"All right, I fell for it," Mary-Jean said. "What do I have to buy? I'll buy whatever you want. Just get out of here quickly."

"But isn't it clear? I sell happiness. And you told me what kind of happiness you want. Since, as I have indicated, you have already made payment, it only remains for me to grant your wish and—"

"Then why were you laughing at me?"

"Dear lady! Because you thought your request would be so peculiar. Don't you realize, it isn't peculiar at all. It is the request of most young housewives. They are bored, they are fairly shriveling up with the hot desert blast of routine. They want change, adventure, intrigue, romance. They want to attract these things. Precisely as you want."

"Then—"

"Then, you may consider it a sale. Here . . ."

And as the peddler reached into his enormous suitcase, the obscuring haze vanished abruptly. With an eager little cry, Mary-Jean glanced over his shoulder—and saw nothing but row and row of small white bottles, like bottles of hand cream.

"But—" she began.

"Eh, dear lady? Oh, I see. Naturally, naturally you expected somethting far more exotic than a kind of lotion. Well, didn't you?"

"I—I guess I did."

"Which explains the haze. If you saw the bottles of lo-

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tion, you'd never bare your heart to me. If, on the other hand, you saw merely a closed suitcase, it would not intrigue you so much as an opened suitcase, its contents obscured by haze. Correct?"

Mary-Jean nodded as the peddler selected with his plump hand a small white jar from the second row. He placed it in Mary-Jean's hand and she felt a strange tingling as contact was made. Her fingers instinctively clutched the jar.

"One application," the peddler said, closing his suitcase. "One only: the entire contents of the jar, please."

"But where—how—?"

"Just apply the balm anyplace on your person. Then you may shower. Then—but then you will see."

"Yes, but—but isn't there going to be anything else. I mean, surely you *must* be selling something."

The peddler smiled, showing the broken yellow teeth again. "Dear lady, I have already sold it. May I wish you all the best of luck." He walked with the enormous suitcase to the front door. He opened the door and paused on the threshold. "There is one thing," he said.

So here it comes at last, Mary-Jean thought.

"I shall return in twenty-four hours to see what your decision is."

"My decision?"

"We allow our customers the right to accept our product on a twenty-four-hour trial basis. I shall return here in precisely twenty-four hours. I mean *precisely;* you see, my schedule is a busy one. If at that time you wish to become your old self again, you have merely to tell me. On the other hand, if you are satisfied with the change, with your new personality, all you have to do is not keep the appointment with me and the change will then be a permanent one. You understand?"

And, before Mary-Jean could answer, the old peddler had disappeared. Not walked up the flagstone walk and to the sidewalk. Disappeared. In the blinking of an eye. Simply vanished.

Mary-Jean shuddered with a sudden chill although it was early summer.

Then she ran upstairs clutching her jar of happiness balm.

She removed her robe and went to the mirror again, looking at herself critically. A nice little figure, she thought, thinking the word nice so it meant average and decent and

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ordinary, but nothing special. A moderately pleasing face, if she spent sufficient time making up. But she just wasn't the sort of person who would attract adventure. She never had been and never would be and her life would go right on, mundanely and prosaically, unless . . .

Wildly before she could stop the sudden impulse, she unscrewed the cover of the jar of happiness balm, took a big gob of the sticky white stuff with the vaguely exotic perfumy smell on each hand and began to rub it all over herself.

When she finished the brief operation, when the jar was completely empty, she felt a moment of shame. You're a fool, Mary-Jean, she thought. There's not a thing going to happen, not one solitary thing because of your happiness balm. Attract adventure, my foot! But strangely, the balm stiffened on her bare skin, began to tingle. She had never felt anything quite like it and soon the tingling became so strong that it began to alarm her. She ran into the shower and turned the needle-spray on full power. And, she told herself, showering was part of the happiness balm treatment. Oh, great. Just great, Mary-Jean. You're a baby. A big, twenty-eight-year-old pipe-dreaming baby. Because you really did fall for it, all right. If that practical joker of a peddler could see you now, he'd laugh his bald little head off. And this, she continued the silent monologue as she scrubbed herself with a cloth and soap, this is one harmless little escapade you'll never mention to Tom. Tom has no mercy that way. He'd laugh so hard he'd hardly be able to eat his supper.

His supper! Mary-Jean jolted herself with the sudden thought. She had forgotten all about the cooking stew. Probably, it needed more water. Probably, it was already burning, already ruined. . . .

She rushed from the shower, clutched her robe, flung it over her shoulders like a cape and fairly flew downstairs. She ran into the kitchen and could just make out the first faint suggestion of a scorching smell. She removed the pot from the burner, assayed the damage, stirred the contents, added water, and replaced the pot with a little sigh of relief.

She went upstairs slowly, still wearing her robe like a cloak over her nakedness. And strangely, she realized all at once, although she had wash-

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ed the so-called happiness balm off herself thoroughly, her skin still tingled.

And, now that she was growing accustomed to it, the tingling was a decidedly pleasant sensation. Decidedly. It was like a thousand thousand tiny fingers racing across her skin, racing, racing. . . .

With a sudden wild impulse Mary-Jean flung the robe off and looked at herself in the mirror. Her knees went weak on her, so weak that she had to clutch the edge of her vanity table for support.

She was beautiful.

She looked again. The beauty, the delirious thought of that beauty, could wait. She was changed. Different. Changed utterly.

She wasn't Mary-Jean Wilson any longer.

The transformation left her breathless. There was no doubt about her new looks. She was beautiful. Her hair was not the washed-out dirty blonde it had been, but a gossamer veil of finest platinum blonde framing a lovely face, a face right out of the women's slick magazines she always dreamed over. And her body—she shivered with delight. She had always been a little shy about her body, even with Tom. There had never been any reason, not really: she had a perfectly adequate little figure and Tom always said, particularly at night, that he liked the way she was built.

But now she was statuesque. She turned slowly, nude, before the mirror. She had a long curving length of calf and bold firm swelling thighs and a sweeping arc of hip below a narrow, flat waist and proudly high breasts. . . .

It was some kind of hallucination, she told herself. It had to be. You're Mary-Jean Wilson. You haven't changed. She moved away from the mirror uncertainly. The glorious apparition moved away, inside the mirror. She moved back. It moved back. She touched a hand to her bare throat. It touched a hand to its bare throat.

Mary-Jean Wilson, she thought. Cross out Mary-Jean Wilson. I'm a new edition. I'm . . . I'm . . . tears welled in her eyes. There wasn't any doubt about it: she was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, in real life, in the movies, in the slick magazines, anywhere. She had been changed utterly. Transformed. Metamorphosed. Into a stunning, radiant creature.

The happiness balm?

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But of course. It had to be the happiness balm.

Wait until Tom saw her . . . held her . . .

Tom?

She shuddered. How did you tell your husband? How did you reveal yourself? Here's the new me, Tom? How do you like it? How—how do you like the merchandise I bought from a peddler who came around in the afternoon.

She couldn't tell Tom. Not now, not yet. She wouldn't know how to approach him. Probably, he wouldn't even believe her. He'd never accept this beautiful creature as his mundane little wife. Never—

Then what did you do? Run away?

But she had nothing against Tom. Plain, steady Tom with his normal likes and dislikes, his pillar-of-the-community attitude, his pipe-smoking solidness, his liking for carpet-slippers and the newspaper after supper. She couldn't desert Tom.

But neither could she reveal herself—her new self—to him.

All at once she remembered. Twenty-four hours. Then the peddler would return. She looked at her watch. He would be back at exactly four-fifteen tomorrow afternoon. *Exactly* four-fifteen, she reminded herself. To be precise was crucial.

Very well, that decided it for her. She would have twenty-four hours before she had to tell Tom. Until four-fifteen tomorrow afternoon. Twenty-four hours. It wasn't a long time, but oddly it frightened her. Because there wasn't any doubt about the new body, the new face. They would attract—and she wasn't only thinking of sex appeal. Naturally, they had sex appeal. For a woman, that was part of—perhaps a large part of—attracting adventure.

Twenty-four hours, Mary-Jean told herself. Mary-Jean? It didn't sound right. It no longer fit her new personality. Then what? What name? Even a new name for the twenty-four hours. I know, she thought happily, her skin still glowing, still tingling strangely. I'll be Jeanne—Jeanne-Marie! It sounds so French and—and exciting.

It was almost the cocktail hour now, not that Mary-Jean went for cocktails. But Jeanne-Marie? Jeanne-Marie might. Indeed, she might. So Jeanne-Marie got into a cocktail dress which fit her properly for the first time. Actually, she found, although she looked much taller than Mary-

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Jean, she wasn't, not really. There were subtle structural differences which made her look taller, slimmer, statuesque. And the dress fit her like a sheath.

She scrawled a note for Tom. Plain, honest Tom, she thought, with some sadness. *Dear Tom: Called out of town unexpectedly. I wish I could explain. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon.* She wanted to add *maybe* but did not. *There's supper for you and Tommy in the fridge. Don't worry about me because I'll be all right. I'll be fine. That's putting it mildly—I'll be just great. See you tomorrow. Love, Mary-Jean.* Almost, she had signed Jeanne-Marie. She looked at the note, frowned, and tore it up. It would be an adequate note for Mary-Jean to write, but not Jeanne-Marie. She took a fresh sheet of paper and scrawled:

Back tomorrow. Called away suddenly. Mary-Jean.

That was more like it: a note with the trip-hammer, cryptic mystery of a telegram. The other note made it seem as if Tom took her for granted, would fortify any such notions he had. That might have been all right with Mary-Jean, but Jeanne-Marie wouldn't stand for such a thing. Satisfied, Jeanne-Marie went downstairs.

And the front door opened.

It was Tommy, she thought with sudden alarm, seven-year-old Tommy back from school and his cub scout pack meeting. She watched him come in. Mechanically, because there was nothing else to do, she continued down the stairs.

"H'lo," Tommy said, looking at her. "My mother upstairs?"

"Why, no, no, she isn't," Jeanne-Marie said. "She went away for the day. She left a note for your father."

"Who're you?"

"Oh, just a friend. Be—be a good boy until your father gets home, Tommy. Why don't you play with your trains?"

"Who told you I have trains?"

"Oh, your mother told me." She was at the front door now. "Your mother did. Well, g'bye."

"Bye," Tommy said.

A taxi was waiting at the curb. She had known—almost—that it would be. For Jeanne-Marie did not have to seek things out. They sought her—grateful for the privilege.

The cabbie stared at her with frank admiration and she didn't mind. She didn't

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mind at all. You couldn't consider it fresh. It was more like—more like homage. It was her due.

The cabbie's expected question: "where to, lady?" was replaced by a polite, "Madam?"

On impulse, Jeanne-Marie named the city's most fasionable cocktail and supper club, the Black Flamingo. Then she settled back in the cushions, relaxing. Traffic was heavy and the cabbie stole several admiring glances in the rear-view mirror, but still they made incredible time, as if all the other drivers knew that Jeanne-Marie had twenty-four hours of glorious adventure ahead of her and wanted to embark on it at once.

All the traffic made way for Jeanne-Marie. Naturally it did.

Homage was paid Jeanne-Marie at the *Black Flamingo* too. There she was ushered across the crowded floor and given a ringside table near the cocktail hour pianist. The sweet, seductive music he played, the dimness within the *Black Flamingo*, the almost abstract pattern of flamingos in motion on the walls, the cigarette haze, the constant humming buzz of cocktail chatter, the first cocktail—a gibson—Jeanne-Marie ordered, all combined for an effect of drowsiness, of time suspension, which Jeanne-Marie had never experienced before.

Then the conversational buzz receded, like a tide ebbing. Jeanne-Marie blinked. Most of the crowd was gone. She looked at her wrist watch and saw that two hours had passed, looked at the small round surface of her table with the *Black Flamingo* placemat and saw three cocktail glasses, all empty. Soon, Jeanne-Marie realized with a growing sense of disappointment, the before-theater crowd would bring the tide flowing back to the *Black Flamingo* again. But her disappointment stemmed from the fact that nothing had happened to her and it was now almost seven o'clock. Oh, she had been stared at, admired, ogled even—but what beautiful girl wouldn't be? It was not that Jeanne-Marie had taken her twenty-four hours of beauty for granted. Rather, it was not beauty—certainly not beauty alone—she had wished for. And it wasn't sex appeal, either, she told herself. Jeanne-Marie loved her husband and had experienced no lewd, day-dreaming fantasies about a secret lover who would sweep her off her pro-

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verbial feet. But Jeanne-Marie had waited, with a mixture of patience and passion, all her life—for something to happen. Something out of the ordinary. Something thrilling, as far removed from the pattern of her humdrum day-to-day existence as—as the spiral nebula in Andromeda.

But, Jeanne-Marie told herself, I don't seem to attract adventure—not even when I'm beautiful. Would she then have to spend all the rest of her life waiting, waiting for that sudden knocking at the door, for the face of the unknown to make itself thrillingly known?

She sighed and ordered another drink. She sipped it slowly, and sipped it, she knew, as if she spent much time sipping cocktails. Naturally, Mary-Jean's consumption of cocktails had been limited—generally to one a year, and that on the day of her wedding anniversary. But an ability to drink cocktails in a sophisticated manner seemed to go with the new body—with Jeanne-Marie.

When Jeanne-Marie was staring in moody silence at the little pickled pearl onion in the bottom of the now-empty cocktail glass, she was aware that someone had sat down beside her. A thrill of surprise and delight went through her body, making her shiver. This was the unexpected, she told herself. She knew it would be a man without looking. Knew it would be a good-looking fellow with the stamp of the man-of-the-world on his features. He could be nothing else.

And so it was.

Then Jeanne-Marie turned around slowly, not knowing if she should smile. When she faced the man now seated at her table, she gave him a cool quizzical look. He was a big man somewhere in his mid-thirties, with a craggy but handsome face and very wide shoulders. He was dressed, Jeanne-Marie decided, in quite good taste but expensively.

He muttered, "Didn't expect you to be so pretty."

Cocktail patter, thought Jeanne-Marie. "That's a very funny way to put a compliment."

The man said, still in hardly more than a whisper, "Fellows looking around. Three or four of them. Act like you know me. A thousand dollars. You're my wife or something like that."

He had already arranged the cocktail glasses on the table so that it looked as if

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both of them had been drinking. He said, "Well?"

"What did you mean about not expecting—?"

"You. Back of your head was all I saw. A girl, I thought. Obscurity of a couple when they're looking for a single man. But you. You stand out like Niagara Falls in the middle of the Sahara. See what I mean?"

"Thank you," Jeanne-Marie said. "Who is looking for you?"

"Remember what I said. Start looking like we mean something to each other."

And, before Jeanne-Marie could offer a protest, the man slid his chair around the small table, clutched at Jeanne-Marie's hand with one of his hands and put his other arm around her shoulder. He smiled at her, his face inches from hers, holding a cocktail glass up as if making a toast. He seemed to be relaxed and having fun, but this close Jeanne-Marie could tell his face was set tensely, rigidly, in an easy cocktail smile. When she saw the tension leave, she knew that whoever it was who sought him was gone—at least for now.

"All right," she said coolly. "I've shielded you. Now get out of here."

"I said a thousand dollars, but you haven't earned it yet."

Jeanne-Marie gave him the kind of scathing look which went very well with her new face but which, on Mary-Jean's face, would have been ludicrous. "Do I look as if I need a thousand dollars?" she asked.

"No, but—"

"So if you'll just find yourself another table."

Actually, Jeanne-Marie did not mean those words. Her new face and body were de-

"Chap stick, please."

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signed to attract adventure. Were they, then, bait for this man? She decided that they were, but the conversation had taken a natural course which she instantly regretted.

"But I can't do that," the man said. "Maybe they caught a glimpse of me here. Not enough to recognize me, but enough to know I belong with the gorgeous dame at such-and-such a table. See what I mean?"

"Who are you?"

He smiled, still holding her hand. He squeezed it. "Call me Lucky. But I don't know about tonight—lucky or not, I mean."

"Are they the police?"

"Yeah. They're the police."

"You did something?"

"What do you think they're doing, practicing?"

"I—I'm sorry. What did you do?"

"Let's drop it. You wouldn't want to know."

"Oh, but I would."

"You'd make me beat it. Or you'd call them."

"I will—if you don't tell me."

He smiled. "I guess you kind of got me."

"What did you do?"

"It was a meeting. Call it a board of directors meeting and you'd be close. We—"

"Board of directors of what?" The questions came quickly, unbidden almost, to Jeanne-Marie's lips. She felt suddenly very quick-minded and very capable.

"Well, call it a syndicate."

"The national syndicate of crime? Is that what you mean? Are you one of the directors?"

He nodded slowly and said admiringly, "Baby, you're not only beautiful, you've got a mind like a trip-hammer."

"Go on."

"There was the last thing such a board of directors would ever want. A fight."

"Someone was hurt?"

"Killed."

"Oh, I see." But she did not see. The words came automatically. What did Jeanne-Marie—or Mary-Jean—know of murder?

"I was fingered," Lucky said.

"You did it?"

"I say I didn't do it. Who do you believe?"

"I don't believe anyone," Jeanne-Marie said, the words coming quickly to her, apparently plucked from air. "I never believe anyone. What's the difference?"

"Plenty of difference. Because I'm getting out of here. But I'll never get out alone. They're looking for a single

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man. I can get out with you, I think."

Just then, before Jeanne-Marie could answer, he leaned forward quickly and kissed her. Jeanne-Marie stiffened and then relaxed for a moment, then stiffened again. She pushed him away gently, saying curtly, "Don't try that again."

"I can't figure you out," he said. "One minute you talk like a woman who's been around, the next like some dilly of a housewife from suburbia. What do you think I kissed you for? Just because you're beautiful? Hell, I've seen beautiful girls before. Plenty of them, and some as beautiful as you. Well, almost, anyway," he added, and they both smiled. "I kissed you because one of the cops drifted through. Listen, baby. Will you be my passport out of here?"

"Why should I be?" Jeanne-Marie asked him coolly.

"Because I'm asking you. Because maybe fate meant we should meet like this tonight—"

"Oh, now, really," Jeanne-Marie said. "You don't mean that and you know you don't. One sure way *not* to get me to do anything for you is to throw me a line like that."

Lucky shrugged. "O.K., baby. If you were in my place, what would you do?"

"Umm-mm. I see what you mean. But I wouldn't throw you such an obvious line if I threw you a line at all."

"Can I force you to come with me?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

"O.K.," Lucky smiled. "Let's try it. I've got a gun in my pocket, baby."

She grinned back at him. "That's nice."

"Maybe I'm pointing it at you under the table. Well, it's possible, isn't it?"

"It's possible."

"How'm I doing?"

"Pretty good—if I thought you had a gun. Anyway, I like it much better than the line."

"Good. If you don't get up and walk with me, quietly, walk right out of here with me—I'll use the gun. I'm desperate. Do you believe me?"

"No," Jeanne-Marie said promptly. For all his hard, capable good looks, Lucky seemed crestfallen. "But," Jeanne-Marie added slowly, "I'll go with you. As far as the street and no further."

Lucky squeezed her hand and signaled for the waiter. "I'll pay the check," he said.

"You're darned right you will," she said, and they both laughed.

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Two hours in my new body, Jeanne-Marie thought, and I'm helping a murderer to elude the police. A murderer? Well, he says he's not. His word is the only word I have so I guess I can go through with it with something like a clean conscience. Clean conscience or not, she knew she'd act as Lucky's passport out to the street. Because Lucky, she could somehow sense, was the adventure that the new Jeanne-Marie, the peddler's Jeanne-Marie, had summoned.

The bill paid, they got up from the table. Lucky slipped his arm through hers and, their flanks together, they walked toward the exit. The pianist was playing a rhythmic rendition of the September Song. The pre-theater crowds were out now, Jeanne-Marie knew, filling the *Black Flamingo* and the other cocktail places, and the street as well. Once on the street, Lucky could probably make good his escape.

They went by the hat-check booth now, and out across a carpeted hallway, to a French door which led, up a little flight of stairs, to the street. A doorman swung the French doors out.

"Stop!" someone cried behind them.

Acting on instinct, the doorman slammed the French doors. Lucky whirled and swung his right fist brutally at a man running up behind them. Jeanne-Marie screamed as the man fell heavily. Then, incredibly, Lucky did have a gun in his hand. He pointed it at the doorman and said something and magically the doors swung open. Still holding Jeanne-Marie's arm and all but dragging her, Lucky sprinted up the short flight of stairs to the street. Footsteps pounded up after them as Lucky waved down a cab.

Jeanne-Marie tried to pull herself away from him, but his fingers dug into her upper arm painfully. "I'm not playing now," he said, his voice brutal. "Maybe it was a more subtle line than you thought, baby, but I'm not playing now. You're still my passport and you're going on being my passport till I tell you different."

He threw open the rear door of the cab and heaved Jeanne-Marie inside. She fell against the leather upholstery and heard the driver say:

"Hey, what the hell is this?"

Voices shouted outside the cab. Feet pounded across the sidewalk. "I don't want no part of this!" the driver

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shouted. It was almost a wail.

Lucky waved the gun and said in a quiet voice which still must have thundered in the driver's ear. "Start driving and start driving fast."

A moment later the cab leaped away from the curb.

As they joined the heavy stream of pleasure-bound traffic, Jeanne-Marie felt an instant of intense panic. Lucky had admitted it: Lucky's smooth line inside the *Black Flamingo,* his suave man-of-the-world attitude had been the real decoy. And Jeanne-Marie had fallen for it. But smooth line and man-of-the-world attitude, she knew now, hid a desperate fugitive who would stop at nothing.

Lucky wasn't watching her now. His eyes were glued to the rear window of the cab, watching the traffic behind them; looking for signs of pursuit.

"How about a break, Mac?" the driver asked. "I could let you off at a bus stop or a subway or something. I could—"

"You could keep on driving out to the expressway and keep going north on the expressway until I tell you different."

But at that moment the cab braked slowly to a stop for a red light. On the far side of the street, on the curb, Jeanne-Marie spied a policeman. Watching the cab driver's face, she knew he had seen the uniformed patrolman too. A muscle throbbed in his jaw and Jeanne-Marie knew suddenly he was going to try something.

A word, she thought. One word between them could mean so much. Because if she could help him, if she could occupy Lucky's attention at the precise moment the cab driver tried to signal the policeman . . .

But Lucky must have seen it too. He leaned forward and slashed the automatic across the driver's neck, barrel-first, the sights raking the flesh and leaving a twin track of blood. The driver shook his head from side to side, like a fighter who has taken too much punishment. He opened his mouth to yell but Lucky's arm went around his throat.

"Don't," Lucky said. "I've killed a man already tonight. I can kill you too and it wouldn't make any difference. Just drive."

There, thought Jeanne-Marie, it was out now. He had killed a man. He admitted it. All sham, all pretense was gone. The charming man of the world was now completely

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gone, replaced by the ruthless killer.

The light changed to green —had been green for some time now. Horns blared behind them. The driver shifted gears and they began to drive again.

Still standing on the corner, the policeman had seen nothing.

Three hours later, they were still driving. The city was behind them now. They had sped through the darkness and obscurity of the northern suburbs as night fell and now were in a rural area. The expressway rimming the city had become the state parkway going north, and some twenty minutes ago they had left the parkway behind them, traveling a two-lane black-top road.

"Next left," Lucky told the frightened driver, and moments later the cab braked and turned up a dirt road hardly more than a trail.

"Friend of mine used to own this place," Lucky explained as they stopped before a small log cabin. Actually log, Jeanne-Marie thought, only ninety-some miles from the city. It was totally unexpected. "Used to use it for a hunting lodge."

He opened the door and held it that way for Jeanne-Marie, who climbed out of the cab. Then Lucky leaned in across the driver and removed the ignition key from the dash, pocketing it. "You get out of there, too," he said.

"I thought I'd just be going now, mister."

"That's very funny."

"I thought—"

"I said, get out."

"Look mister, The wife will start to worry. If the wife worries, she calls the company. The company makes a check and realizes I haven't called in. We got a two-way radio hook-up and you're supposed to call in on all fares. If the company sees I haven't called in, they start looking. Then where would you be?"

"Right here," Lucky said. "With you. And they'll never find you here. Any other questions? No? Then get out. That's right. Go inside the cabin. You ought to find some canned goods in there, and some sterno. Whip up supper for us, will you?"

Grumbling, the driver went up the split-log railed porch and into the cabin.

"It isn't locked?" Jeanne-Marie said.

"No lock on it. Nice here, isn't it?"

"Who cares if it's nice or not? You're a fugitive, you're

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running away, I'm a hostage. That's all that matters."

"Is it? You know, baby, there's something nice about being desperate. Something real fine. I don't even know your name. You don't know mine. Except Lucky. And you know something? I'm not even going to ask you your name. I can suddenly start admiring things, too. Like the scenery."

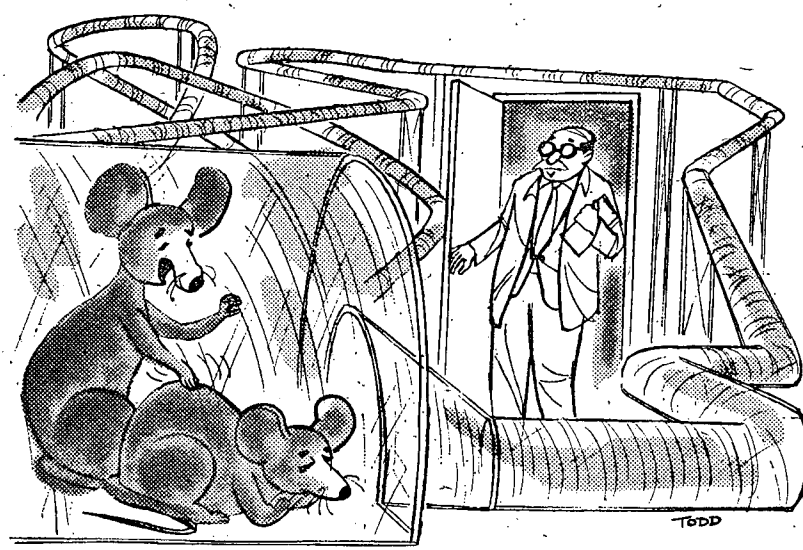
"You're talking in circles." "No, I'm not. When you're a fugitive, with utterly nothing to lose, and when you happen to have as a hostage the most beautiful girl you've ever seen, and if your capture puts a permanent end to seeing any kind of girl—let alone such a beautiful one—now do you see?"

Instead of answering him, Jeanne-Marie walked quickly up the hill from where the cab was parked to the cabin. The driver wouldn't be much help—but his presence alone might stop Lucky. . . .

But Lucky caught her before she had covered half the distance to the cabin. "Figure I'm a dying man and well, like it's the wish of a dying man to—to—listen, baby. You're very beautiful."

He held both her arms now, pinning them to her side. She

(Continued on page 118)



"Wake up. It's time for today's rat race."

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A TRICK OF THE MIND

By WILLIAM P. SALTON

The average person uses about ten percent of his mind. The rest lies dormant. But Donovan's whole brain suddenly went into action. This posed an interesting question. Can a man think his way out of jail?

PAUL DONOVAN was sitting at a bar when he learned the trick. He had reached out to lift his martini glass when his hand stopped in mid-air—stood rigid—refused to move.

Paul stared at it. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Thoughts of paralysis raced through his mind. The hand and arm seemed things apart and he had a feeling of not possessing them—of complete divorcement from these members. Then he realized his whole body was frozen and his mind—there was something new about it—something alien; as though it floated above his head and looked down at him in amusement.

Panic flared, then subsided, as he became aware of a strange newness within himself; vague and undefinable, this newness, but it was definitely a change; something he had never felt before.

Think, he told himself fiercely. *There's nothing wrong with you. You aren't drunk. This is only your second martini. Stop this nonsense and pick up that glass.*

The order was given with every ounce of his brain power behind it. And the order was obeyed—but in a completely illogical manner. His body instantly became lax and docile, but the offending hand dropped to the bar as the martini glass—seemingly of its own volition—moved across the bar, levitated to his lips, tilted, and poured the drink into his mouth. The

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martini went smoothly down his throat after which the glass returned to its former position.

Paul snatched out a handkerchief and wiped his lips as he glanced guiltily up and down the bar. Had anyone been watching? Apparently not. Then Paul saw a small man with an ingrown chin get shakily off his stool.

The little man gulped as he eyed Paul in terror. Then he looked back at his own beer glass as though it had turned into a cobra. Now he threw down a quarter and headed for the door.

Paul grinned. Not interested in questioning or analyzing his new power, he was satisfied in being happy with it, in examining its possibilities.

He ordered another drink. The barkeep set it before him, turned away, and another miracle was performed, as slowly, steadily, the martini glass moved across the polished bar.

At the edge, it rose evenly in the air. The martini glided smoothly down Paul's throat. Empty, the glass returned to the table.

Paul tingled all over, thoroughly enjoying the new thrill, the new sense of power. It was far more intoxicating than the martinis themselves.

With a marked sense of superiority he again looked up and down the bar. The first flash of fear gone, he now regarded the other drinkers with patronizing contempt.

That fat fellow there at the end for instance. Drinking a manhattan. Trying to look like a banker. Trying to impress the people. Pompous ass! *Maybe I can fix his wagon,* Paul thought.

The man raised his glass with an exaggerating sweep of his hand. Paul concentrated and the poor unfortunate poured its entire contents over his immaculate shirt front.

The barflies snickered as the man fumbled a bill onto the bar and fled.

It worked, Paul gloated.

A waiter passed carrying a tray of appetizers. Paul closed his eyes "thought" one into his mouth and tasted the sharp salty flavor of anchovy. This was fun!

Next he noticed a glossy dame sitting near the center of the bar pushing out her front until it reminded him of twin cannons. So she thought she could scrounge

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another drink from the guy next to her, huh? Why didn't she just pick his pocket and be done with it?

Why not indeed? Effortlessly the man's wallet flew out of his hip pocket and arced down into her low-cut bodice. The girl angled her popping eyes downward. Paul chuckled to himself as she slipped off the stool and headed for the ladies' room.

It was all so easy.

If he could manipulate his new-found power so cleverly, why not do something truly epic? Like dropping a brick on his boss's head. Or—come to think of it—how about putting some money into his own pocket?

The cashier at the end of the bar rang up a sale. Then with the cash drawer still open his attention was attracted by a waiter. Opportunity! With hardly any effort at all Paul transferred a ten-dollar bill from the drawer into his shirt pocket. It crackled excitingly as he pressed it flat with a casual hand.

Pure excitement swept him. He could do anything! Move into the really spectacular. He could—could even rob a bank!

Thus when the armored truck pulled up across the street his mind was conditioned for its arrival. Through the window he saw the rear door open. Then two armed guards emerged. Bored by the routine, one of them actually yawned as a third guard appeared from the theatre entrance in front of which they were parked. He was carrying a satchel.

As he handed it into the truck Paul's mind worked automatically. Then he watched as the guards vanished inside the truck and closed the door. The truck spouted a white exhaust and pulled away.

Paul was trembling now, suddenly aghast at what he had done. This wasn't a parlor game anymore, and he told himself it hadn't happened; told himself this in quick desperation; that this whole thing had been nothing more than an idle daydream, a moment's relaxation along with a few drinks.

Like hell it was! Regardless of how he figured it he was now a bigtime thief. Bigtime? How much is bigtime? How much money was now stuffed in the briefcase beside his stool? He reached down surreptitiously and hefted the bag for weight. Plenty!

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He ordered another drink and gave it no chance to play tricks, snatching the glass firmly by the stem and lifting it the old fashioned way. It didn't help much.

Then real panic welled up as a heavy hand dropped on his shoulder, and he turned and saw the goggle eyes of the little fat man; saw a pudgy finger pointed accusingly.

"I tell 'ya officers this is the guy. And he's nuts. Stark raving nuts, I'm telling 'ya. He gets his drinks without even lifting them. They bounce right off the bar."

There were two policemen, a rather bored oldster with signs of breakfast on the front of his uniform and a spruced up young patrolman not yet disillusioned.

The older cop dropped his hand from Paul's shoulder and spoke with a certain deference. "This is no charge, mister. Just a routine look-in. Our friend here is all excited about something and—well, you know how it is."

"That's okay, officer," Paul croaked, striving to control his voice. The younger cop, taking a cue from his superior's manner, threw a stern look at the discomfitted fat man. "Do you want to prefer any charges, mister?"

The fat man took an involuntary backward step, banged his heel against Paul's briefcase and instantly both policemen were staring at the floor.

Paul's eyes followed their's. A chill went deep into his bones. That faulty catch. He'd meant to get it fixed. Now it was his undoing as a heap of banded banknotes spilled out on the floor.

The elder cop broke the silence. "Maybe there'll be some charges—maybe not—but I think we'll take a walk to the station all the same."

Paul clawed at his mind for a retort. "Any law against carrying money?" he asked trying to make it sound light.

"No law against it—no. But you've got to admit this is pretty unusual."

"Do you think I stole this money?"

The officer tipped his cap back and scratched his ear reflectively. "No, but I got a hunch it doesn't belong to you. I don't think you got any right sitting here in this bar with it. I think maybe you got a boss somewhere that might have sent you to a bank or something and he could be real nervous wondering why you don't get back. We'll just

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take a little walk to the station and no offense to anybody, okay?"

Paul's mind was numb as he stood between the officers at the call box. He could not force his brain to function even normally, let alone execute any mental tricks discovered in the bottom of a martini glass. A squad car pulled up and he climbed docilely in the back seat and sat like a man in a trance between the two silent policemen. At the station there was the added chill of feeling like a man alone, a criminal involved in a terrible experience that was merely routine to the tormentors who walked by his side.

It was one of the older stations with a well-worn floor marked by the scuffing footsteps of many an unhappy wrongdoer. The desk sergeant had a sagging disillusioned face and a pair of eyes that had given up all hope of Utopia. He turned them on Paul and grunted, "What's the gripe?"

The senior officer did the talking. "We don't exactly know, Sergeant, but we got a lead on this character, found him sitting in a gin mill with enough dough in his ketch to pay off the national debt. It seemed a little out of line somehow."

The desk sergeant stretched his scrawny neck and peered down at the offending briefcase. "The dough in there?"

"Right."

"Let's have a look."

The younger officer lifted the bag as though it contained the secret to every unsolved crime on the books and deposited it triumphantly on the desk.

"Pretty battered leather to lug around real dough in," the sergeant commented. He lifted the flap and reached inside. Then he scowled at the accusing cop and tipped the briefcase upside down.

A sheaf of white papers fell out; a pack of new lead pencils Paul had lifted from the supply shelf that afternoon and a copy of *Lurid Sex* he had bought at the corner newsstand. That was all.

The desk sergeant slammed the briefcase down on the desk and glowered at the trio before him. "What kind of a rib is this? You jerks think I got nothing more to do than sit here and let you bounce your gags off me? Besides this isn't even a gag. It's got no point. Let's have the snapper, I'm listening."

The elder cop turned pale

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with amazement. The younger one, obviously of different metabolism, had turned beet red. After a thick pause they found their voices simultaneously.

"I'll swear on the Bible that there was money in that damn briefcase when we first looked into it . . ."

Paul passed up the bus, preferring to walk the ten blocks to his apartment. He needed the air and the sense of freedom was glorious. Thank heaven his mind had come unstuck that last moment and now the sheaf of money was back where it belonged—in the satchel of the armored car guard. Humbled, completely chastened and not a little scared, Paul hoped he had caused no one any inconvenience.

And strong indeed were his resolutions: no more mental transference. In fact no more martinis. From now on he would get his money the hard way. In the end that would turn out to be by far the easiest.

THE END

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SCIENTIFIC MYSTERIES

THE IRON INVADERS

ON 12 February 1947 at 10:35 A.M. the Siberian villagers of Novopokrovka were startled by something like a tremendous bolt of lightning, bright as the sun and of the apparent size of the moon, hurtling awesomely across the cloudless sky and leaving in its wake a dark track which glowed spectrally that night.

The most able astrophysicists were notified and promptly tracked the "bolt of lightning" —which was, in reality, a huge meteor, to the Sikhotalin Mountains, where they viewed a vast scene of destruction. What they saw was an area of one square mile pitted with numerous holes, 30 to 40 feet deep, many 75 feet wide. Everywhere were shattered boulders, fallen and uprooted trees. The impact threw a column of rocks and debris 20 miles into the air. The scientists estimated the size of the meteor at about one thousand tons. The villagers of Novopokrovka were lucky: they never would have lived to tell the amazing tale if the path of the meteor had been slightly different.

The iron invaders (so far) have been our only visitors from outer space. It has been estimated that about a billion meteors strike the earth's atmosphere every day. Most of them are very small and burn up with the friction of passage, but perhaps one or two thousand actually hit earth, and their total mass is enough to leave a daily deposit of five tons. Most of them travel at 30 miles per second and if they're big enough, become visible at a height of 40 to 60 miles.

Studies of meteoric iron suggest the solidification of the liquid metal at high pressure, and give evidence of a sudden release of that pressure, as, for example, in an explosion or collision. This ties in neatly with the notion that meteors reach us from the asteroid belt, which several experts conclude to be the remains of a fair-sized planet or group of planetary bodies which exploded or collided in the distant past.

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The mystery doesn't end there, for spectacular meteor showers have been associated with the orbits of comets, and, in fact, meteoric displays in the heavens do have a certain periodicity. A number of these have been named for their point of apparent origin in the skies—the Leonids (from the constellation of Leo), the Orionids, the Perseids (which appear regularly in the middle of August). What you see when you watch the summer skies is not the meteor itself, but the trail of hot gases in its wake.

Many facts have been collected about meteors, but as yet, there is no all-inclusive theory to account for their origin and behavior that satisfies all the experts and experts have been at the problem since at least 687 B.C., when the first written records of a meteor shower were found. Meteors have been classified into iron and stone (generally smaller) types, and both of these can appear singly or in groups. In general, they seem to stay close to the plane of planetary orbits and move in the same direction around the sun. Few, if any, come from interstellar space. Recently, radio has been used to track meteors which can be heard as a whine that decreases in pitch, like a falling bomb.

It is an odd and fortunate quirk of fate that to date, no sizable meteor has hit an area of human habitation. But in Wabar, Arabia, there is a legend that a great city that once existed there was suddenly and instantly destroyed by fire from the skies and buried beneath the desert sands. Nearby is a mysterious block of iron, larger than a camel. Two huge craters were found—but no city.

Gigantic iron invaders have bombarded our planet during historic and prehistoric times without warning, leaving vast destruction in their wake. Scars are scattered widely over the globe.

In 1908, on 30 June, an area of 20 to 30 miles was devastated in Central Siberia. The shock wave from this monster was heard and felt 400 miles away! Around Khaipur, India, in 1873, meteorites pelted an area of 48 square miles. Burned out meteors remain in Mexico, South Africa and Greenland, ranging in size from 11 to 60 tons. Central Australia is pitted by a dozen meteors, the largest crater 650 by 350 feet in diameter.

Closer to home, near Winslow, Arizona, is famous Meteor Crater, measuring one mile wide, 570 feet deep, with a rim 130 feet above ground level. Meteoric iron is scattered over a radius of six miles from the spot, rocks at the impact are crushed. But no main meteoric body was discovered — some theorists hold that it was vaporized by the impact. The date of the cataclysm is set at about 5000 years ago. Suppose this unpredictable iron invader had landed not in Arizona, but in the Nile Valley, or

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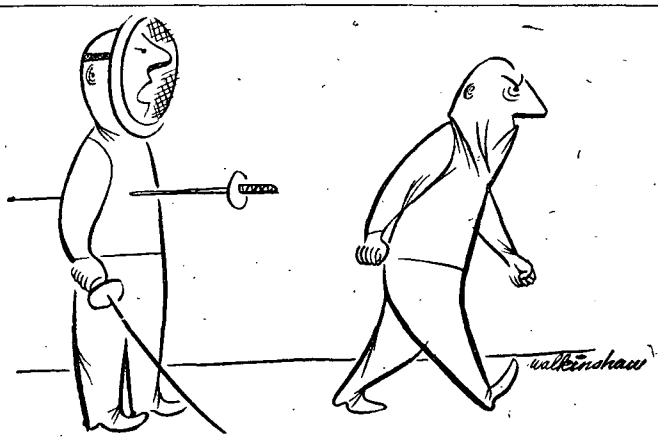
in the Fertile Crescent of the Near East—just when their mighty and magnificent civilizations were taking root. It would have meant desolation, destruction and return to barbarism for the humans who were taking the first steps up the road of history.

In 1950, Chubb, a Canadian prospector, on the trail of diamonds found infrequently in Canadian streams, was looking for an extinct volcano as their source and found, upon inspecting aerial photos of northwest Quebec, a strange, perfectly round lake, which he took to be the crater of an extinct volcano. An expedition was sent out in July to investigate.

On a barren and lifeless rock waste, they found the crater, not of a volcano, but of a meteor of unbelievable size. The lake was partially filled with floating ice and as expedition leader Meen describes it, "No sound broke the stillness except the continuous grinding of the ice and the wind blowing across the crater rim." The rim walls rise from 300 to 500 feet above the surrounding terrain, the crater is twice the size of the one in Arizona—two miles across, or as wide as Manhattan at 42nd Street. The rim is steep and the "splash" effect is there, too—trenches and rifts up to 200 feet deep are cut through the rim. The depth of the lake has not yet been ascertained and shattered rock deeply covers the area around it.

If a meteor the size of the ones that caused the Siberian, Arizonan or Canadian destruction were to land on a great city, the devastation would be incalculable. There can be no warning systems against them, as against enemy bombers, no guided missiles to shoot them down, no international organization to stop them, no time to evacuate helpless populations.

Where—and when—will the next one fall? **THE END**



"You're just a bum sport!"

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A FURNACE FOR YOUR FOE

By ELLIS HART

Wentrell spanned time and space, killing his enemies where he found them; until finally he realized he'd had only one true foe — a man named Wentrell.

"Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot that it do singe yourself."—Shakespeare

TWO things—or rather, two incidents — conspired to alter Geordie Wentrell's less-than-exemplary life. The first was a scene that took place a month before the Indianapolis "1000". It was a scene enacted by Geordie, a dark-eyed man named Irvin, and a ball of pink fat that was Billy Weaver.

"Ten grand isn't enough," Geordie was saying.

The dark-eyed man named Irvin snorted. "Toss him out on his can, Weaver."

"Shut your mouth, Irvin!" Weaver snapped back, the mounds of fat wobbling. The pink man steepled his sausage fingers, and stared across the inlaid blackwood desk at Geordie. "You are a greedy man, Mr. Wentrell. In other circumstances I might be inclined to admire such a trait. But—" his smile was all grease and tension, "but in this instance it might set me back another five thousand dollars, and *that*, I do *not* admire. I refuse to consider any such idea."

Irvin shifted restlessly in his chair. He was annoyed and bored.

Wentrell stood up. The neat creases of his jump-suit fell into line once more, as he strode toward the sliding panel that was the door to *Weaver, Enterprises. "We* can't do business, Mr. Weaver; you want murder too cheaply. It gets crowded up there at two hundred per, and ten Gs

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As the patrol ship approached the women were flung heartlessly into space.

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is just this side of not enough. Get yourself another boy."

He laid his palm in the depression, and the door slid back for him. He went to step through, and did not see the fat man depress a stud on the desktop. The door nearly slid closed on his foot. He leaped back at the last moment, and whirled on Weaver and the dark-eyed man.

"I said not enough, Mr. Weaver." A nasty edge to the Mr. served no notice on the mound of pink fat. "Not enough at all, so open your damn door and let me get back to my practice."

Weaver wore two huge amethyst rings, one on each hand, with tiny gold dragons winding around the settings of each. These he clacked together, his hands fat fists, as he stared at the slim, pale man before the desk. Irvin made as if to rise from the relaxor beside the desk, but Weaver placed a hamlike hand on his broad shoulder, shoved him back into the form-fitting chair.

"You seem to have me by—ah, shall I use the colloquialism with which I'm certain you are familiar—by the short hairs, as they say, Mr. Wentrell. The extra five thousand is yours."

Wentrell shook his head. "You had the chance for the five extra. It's gone up. Seven fifty now."

"Why you sleazy monkey —" Irvin shouted, starting to rise again.

"*Down!* Sit *down*, Irvin. I don't want to have to tell you again."

Weaver stared at Wentrell levelly. "Again you win, Mr. Wentrell." He smiled the greasy smile once more. "I'd best accept your sum now, another moment's hesitation could bankrupt me."

Wentrell sneered; he had unpleasant features, like those of a ferret. "*Nothing* could bankrupt you, Weaver."

"True, true," the fat man conceded, "but you will receive seventeen thousand, five hundred dollars for your—ah —co-operation in this little matter."

"Cash."

"Cash," the fat man agreed slowly.

"Half now, half on delivery," Wentrell pushed.

"Just as you say," and he depressed another stud on the desktop panel. A soft hum backed the silence of the room, and a pillar of some glass-like substance rose out of the floor. It clicked into place when its shaft was two feet above the floor, and the fat man swiveled

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in his chair to touch it. The plump hands did odd things with the perfectly smooth surface of the pillar, finally rubbing in a strange pattern across the flat top. The pillar split down the center, and one half opened out. The fat man gasped as he heaved over his own monstrous lap, to remove a sheaf of bills from the safe.

". . . seventeen thousand, one-two-three-four-five hundred dollars," he said wheezily, and laid a hand on the small stack. Seventeen thousand dollar bills and five one hundred dollar bills were not a very impressive pile beside the huge fistful he had pulled forth.

He replaced the money, ran a hand across the leading edge of the open safe half, and watched as it closed. The stud depressed, the safe once more in the floor (and no break showed in the floor's surface to indicate where the safe had been), he swiveled back, and laid his other hand on the money.

Wentrell made a move toward the desk.

"*Ah.*" The syllable was short and sharp from Weaver. "Let's not be too anxious, Mr. Wentrell." He lifted the crisp bills, holding them as a deck of cards would be held, and snicked them past his ear once. Then he did it again, stopping when he had flipped what seemed to be half the bills. These he handed to Irvin, saying only, "Count it."

The dark-eyed man looked sharply at Wentrell, open dislike festering there, and bent to count. In a moment he looked up, grinned with reptilian enjoyment, and said: "Eight thousand, two hundred." He dropped the bills before Weaver.

"The balance is here, Mr. Wentrell," Weaver pointed out, ticking the remaining bills against his right hand ring. "On successful completion of your—ah—mission."

He nudged the small sheaf toward Wentrell.

The pale man picked up the money and ostentatiously counted it again. Irvin swore softly.

"Okay," Wentrell said, satisfied at his re-count, "now let me see if I've got it right: Next month in the '1000' you've got a boy going by the name of Brown. He's the favorite. You and your bunch are putting a wad on another crate to win. You know the smart money'll be on Brown, and you want me to make sure he stays back in the pack. I'm to slow him as much as possible . . . right?"

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Weaver's forehead wrinkled, as though he did not quite approve of putting his plans in such bold terms. But, "Yes, that is precisely it."

"You know it gets dangerous up there. He might get hurt."

Weaver nodded. It was a go-ahead nod. Mayhem had been sanctioned. Wentrell nodded in return, put the bills inside the sealslit of his jumpshirt, and turned to leave. The door slid open for him, and remained in its slot as he started through.

A soft, deadly voice from Irvin stopped him midway through the door. "You know, Wentrell, I'm trying to figure it. Either you're awfully brave . . . or awfully stupid."

Wentrell wanted to let an ironic smile flit across his face, but it would not come, for fear nudged him out the door, and he left in a cloud of silence.

The door slid silently shut behind him.

The second incident was this:

Rolling in a tight maneuver, the snow-white sonojet banked over the stands and arrowed back toward the two remaining contestants. The Indianapolis "1000" was nearing its climax.

Set far back on the fuselage, Wentrell's bubble began to perspire. Wildly, he snapped a glance at the aerator dial; something must have gone broke in the mechanism. The bubble was fogging over badly, small droplets of moisture running crookedly down on to the dash. He wiped at the window. The moisture only smeared the more.

Wentrell began to sweat. He bit into his pale lower lip viciously, pulling off a bit of the stiff, chapped flesh. A harsh chuckle broke from him, and he slapped at the dash with one hand, keeping his other shoved into the stick-mitt control rod, his eyes on the other two circling sonojets.

Even as his palm slapped the panel, the bubble split and flew whistling away. The emergency shield slid up in its slit, breaking away most of the wind that whipped at Wentrell's face. The insulated helmet did the rest.

For one intolerable instant, as the flash of the shield rising was before his eyes, he saw the ebony-eyed face of Irvin. Then it was gone.

"Getting you out of the race won't be so easy now, Brown," he whispered deep in his throat. The roar of the sonojet cut off all further

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thinking, but the reflexes needed for split-instant spins around the figure pylons that marked the track of the Indianapolis "1000".

Wentrell banked again, diving between the other two ships. They were passing the four hundred and eightieth lap, the hundred and thirty-seventh figure.

As he skimmed past, he caught sight of Screamer Brown's face in the clear plastoid of the other ship's bubble. Wentrell stuck out his tongue as he went past; he was certain the other pilot could not have seen it, but it pleased him to do it, nonetheless.

One of the two massively-faceted pylons rose before him and he right-winged close around it. The huge golden bowl beneath him—the bowl that was the ground-marker of the racecourse limits—reflected back the glare of the sun, blackening in strange shapes as the sonojet shadows flicked over its burnished surface.

The other two ships, almost tail-to-nose, shot around the marker behind him.

Now! screamed Wentrell to himself.

He turned over and over, breathing hard, braking in short, sharp, uneven spurts, as though his reactors were acting up. The ship bucked and heeled, slid toward Screamer Brown's sonojet as it pulled up to take the lead. They were all three closely-grouped when Wentrell deliberately sticked-in on Brown.

Wentrell's underside just nicked the left gull-wing of Brown's ship. He was off again, almost before he had touched, but the job had been done. Brown had been passing the one-mile marker as Claybourne in the third ship was pulling past. He was forced to angle toward it as Wentrell clipped him. The slight impact, coupled with the blast-wave as Claybourne's ship shot out and past, combined to toss Brown's ship out of line.

He swerved, tried frantically to regain his direction, and caught just a glimpse of the marker as it rose up in front of him. Then he struck.

The sun dimmed before the hell-blast of the crash and immediate flare-up of the reactors. The marker pylon disappeared and the sonojet vaporized, and Screamer Brown lost more than the race.

Running at slightly better than two hundred miles an hour, Wentrell was only able to catch the tail-end of the

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pyrotechnics as he did a dip-and-wheel. Then he followed Claybourne in to the finish marker. Claybourne won. Wentrell placed.

Screamer Brown didn't even show.

Seventeen thousand, five hundred dollars was barely enough to cover the agony of the Inquiry and Trial.

"Geordie Wentrell," the silver-haired judge had said levelly, "this court cannot adequately prove malice aforethought in your actions. You are, therefore, 'not guilty' according to the letter of the law." He had paused, his deep eyes narrowing, his lips turning almost as white as his hair. He leaned forward over the podium, pointing a slim but steady hand at Wentrell in the Accused's circle.

"But—

"I don't think there is a soul in this courtroom, or in the world that saw the race, who is unaware of what you have done.

"Legally, we cannot convict you. The jurymech has delivered a verdict of not guilty, and it must stand. But I will not rest, Mr. Wentrell, until I have barred you from every racetrack on this planet!"

The old judge had half-risen from his seat, the power of his emotion actually shaking him, his cheeks blotched with anger.

"No sentence, Wentrell. No sentence at all. Just the one you will live with each moment of your life." Then, as though the very depth of the atrocity he had tried had caught up with him, the judge had sunk back to his seat, and looked away. He had waved his hand peremptorily, and murmured, "Get out. Get out of my courtroom.

"I'm ill at the sight of you!" He motioned weakly to the bailiff to unlock the Accused's circle.

When Wentrell had stepped from the circle, the sounds of the reaction gaugers—tuned to the millions watching the trial on televid—had struck him fully. Wentrell caught the full force of their hatred and revulsion . . . the catcalls, the cursing, the deep-rooted loathing . . . and inside him the fear that had fed like a carrion bird, blossomed and altered, and became something deeper.

He had stepped from the courtroom, between guards who occasionally allowed an onlooker in the crowd to land a blow as they passed down the aisle.

Weaver'll suffer for this, Wentrell thought grimly.

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He was wrong, up to a point.

The office was cool and dim, as it had been the last time. Weaver sat behind the desk, encased in his own body, looking out at the man before him.

"Protect you? I have no idea of what you mean, Wentrell. Protect you against what?"

Geordie Wentrell's attitude was one quite unlike the last time he had been in the office of *Weaver Enterprises*. Now his skin was scarred, and his eyes roamed restlessly, as though afraid the walls would launch assailants. His hands made short, wavering motions, and his feet were seldom idle. Fear lived in his eyes.

"Protect me against the mob, Weaver. You got me into this, now you can get me out. I need all the pull you've got. You'll help me; you've *got* to help me!"

"I don't *got* to do *anything*, Wentrell."

"You hired me—"

"And paid you, as you must recall. You were adequately paid for the few minutes work you did . . . and I see no reason why you should be here now, plaguing me. I'm a busy man, Wentrell. My far-flung enter—"

"Damn your rotten enterprises!" Wentrell cut through. "Damn them, and damn you. You'll protect me or I'll give the whole story to the betting commish. He'd be interested in hearing how you paid me to kill Screamer Brown."

Weaver slid the chair back from the desk, and stood up. His bulk had been deceiving. Short he seemed, but short he was not. He rose over Wentrell by a good six inches, and his girth only accentuated that height. He was heavily impressive, and Wentrell stepped back a pace.

Weaver came around the desk, and moved on the pilot. Wentrell backed till he was flat to the wall. Then Weaver struck live a cobra. His fat hand shot out and entwined in Wentrell's jump-shirt. He pulled the smaller man to him, till his warm, moist breath cloyed at the pilot's face.

"Hear me good, Wentrell.

"The commissioner will undoubtedly listen to your story, and he might even ask me about it when he drops in for cocktails some evening. But I assure you, the only harm that will come from your untimely mouthings, will be to yourself.

"You will be retried, and found guilty, and wind up for thirty years at the Sahara

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Penal Colony—if they don't decide to follow my suggestion and have you cremated at Alcatraz. Now I am being good-hearted about this, Wentrell. I am giving you your life—for what it's worth. Be smart and take it, and don't bother me any further."

He shoved the smaller man back against the wall with force; till Wentrell's breath whoosed out, and his eyes held crazily jittering lights.

"Now get out of here, and don't come back. In five minutes, all record of you will be gone from my receptionist's recordifiles."

He walked back to the desk, depressed the stud, and watched coolly as the door slid open. He turned his spread of back, as if to dismiss the sight of Wentrell forever.

Even as he turned, Geordie Wentrell drew the tiny stinger from his jump-suit, and fired point blank at Billy Weaver. The soft pings of the weapon were barely audible, even across the room, and Weaver slid back against the wall, trying to catch himself, arching his back as though to get away from the pain.

Wentrell stepped to the desk and let the door slide shut at his touch, as he watched Weaver dying. It took the fat man a long time. He tried to turn, and his blubbery lips formed moist circles as he tried to accuse, and he staggered about behind the desk, clutching it for support, as he attempted to reach his assassin.

Finally, Wentrell slid another shot into the fat man's body—the heart—and Weaver crashed to the carpet with a sodden whump! He lay quite still, for he was dead; Wentrell continued to stare at the body for a long minute.

Then he raised the safe-pillar.

Death was right for Weaver, and money was a necessity for Geordie Wentrell. The safe came up, and he tried to remember exactly what hand-motions Weaver had made on the surfaces. He did not get the chance to experiment.

Another panel, in the opposite wall, slid open, and framed in the portal was the dark-eyed man. Irvin stared at the scene before him, and grasped its meaning in an instant. Before Wentrell could gather his wits at being discovered in the act of murder and robbery, Irvin had his own weapon out and pointed.

"Drop," the dark-eyed man said. "Drop and move back."

Wentrell let the stinger

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slide from his numbed fingers, and moved to the center of the room. Irvin came in and stooped to examine the body, continuing to stare at the pilot, the stinger held steadily on Wentrell's head.

"Good job, good job," Irvin chuckled. "You saved me the trouble of having to get it done soon. Weaver was getting on; the organization needs a strong hand to guide it. His was slipping." He rose. "Yes, I think you've been a great help to me, Wentrell. Now go on, get out of here."

Wentrell's blood iced in his body, and the fear that had been his chief property for so long, exploded wildly within him. "What are you going to do? You'll call the police!" he accused.

Irvin grimaced, and repeated his order to get out.

"You'll tell them, you'll tell them I did it!" Wentrell screeched.

Irvin spoke slowly, as though delineating a new philosophy. "You want to know something, Wentrell? You are nothing but a lousy little coward. You had the guts to do the job on Screamer Brown, strictly because you were inside that gnat of yours. But man to man, face to face, you've no gut at all. You're so chicken you stink! Now unless you think you've got the stomach to take me on —even without this thing—" he looked down at the stinger, "—you'd better take your weak spine out of here. The cops are my concern . . . all *you* have to worry about is running. Now beat it, before I forget you're a yellow-belly, and shoot you myself."

The door slid open, and Wentrell felt himself backing through it. What could he do? Irvin was right! He *was* a coward. As frightened as a child, as helpless as a woman. He backed through the door, and the last thing he saw, as it closed on him, was Irvin making the same pattern of motions over the surfaces of the safe that Weaver had made.

Then the door slid across the scene, and he was outside.

It took him the better part of two hours to find a bar where he was not recognized as Geordie Wentrell.

The sanitation men, washing down the streets the next morning, found him beaten and unconscious, drunk and penniless, lying in a gutter, one leg thrown up over the curb.

They were careful to drench him.

Those were the incidents.

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The first was a normal activity of Geordie Wentrell's borderline existence; an inevitable outgrowth of too much cowardice, too much greed and not enough ingenuity. The second —with its two adjuncts: the Inquiry-Trial and the death of Weaver—was even more a product of the pale man's inability to cope with life on its own terms, and his resorting eventually to the tools of the coward. Begging, and murder.

Then came the fleeing.

He had no place left on the Earth. The rabbit warrens that even might house a wanted criminal, were closed to him. He was the man who had killed Weaver, and the Organization wanted him. The police never found out who did it—somehow it was covered up satisfactorily—but in a short time, Irvin decided Wentrell alive was a threat.

So he began to be chivvied, and followed, and attempts were made on his life.

Though he had sunk to a lower level than even the space-ports rats and hangers-on, the wipers and the dream-dust addicts who sold themselves into shipboard slavery to feed their habits, he was hunted, and harried and hounded. The Organization wanted him dead, but Irvin wanted some fun with the yellowbelly before he put him to sleep permanently.

Then came the hiding.

And finally, when there was no gutter or sewer left to him . . . when there was no place left to hide, no place left to run for . . . then Geordie Wentrell was forced to plan revenge.

For what else is left to the man too cowardly even to take his own life?

It had taken over a year, since the night he had stung down Weaver. A year of running and hiding and trying to escape from the inescapable. Geordie Wentrell had been pursued not only by Irvin and his organization—but by the nameless, faceless Fury called fear. It was a year that left him broken and spent, a creature of twilight, always fleeing—even during that brief death known as sleep—never resting, never stopping.

But it also brought him into contact with elements he had never known existed. Or if he had known, he had ignored as beneath his station. But now the harem-pimps and the dream-dusters and the guttersweeps were all above him. For they at least made no bones about what they were: filth they were, vermin

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they were. And they admitted it.

Wentrell still futilely clung to his illusions of skill and position and prominence as a top sonojet racer. He was laughed at, and humiliated, but in that year as he sank over and over into the mire of his culture, he maintained a perspective that would eventually lead to revenge. Just as a man sloughing through garbage retains some of the refuse on him, so Wentrell sank through the lower stratas, and retained familiarity with the effectively—if that word could be so applied—refuse of his culture.

Thus it was that intent and desire and application—as only they could be applied by a man with one final, burning drive—placed Geordie Wentrell on the pleasure liner *Clerkman* on the same hop the dark-eyed man had decided to take to the Pleasure Domes of the asteroid belt.

Irvin had worked wonderously hard in that year. He had expanded the operations of the organization till it might be said of his group that they had drenched the inhabited world of the Solar System with vice and corruption equal to no other cartel in the recorded history of *homo sapiens*.

One of their prime efforts was the import-export trade in white slavery. On the woman-starved worlds of the frontier a female was more valuable than an equal weight in diamonds. Even on the pleasure-sated, dome-studded rocks that comprised the asteroid belt, fresh women were needed regularly. The waste rate was high, the death rate in white slaves even higher.

So a cargo was being ferried to Gorgeous, a five mile chunk of porous rock at the inner edge of the belt, secreted in the lazarette of the *Clerkman*. A ship ostensibly carrying wealthy patrons to Gorgeous for expensive fun and games.

Irvin had chosen to make this trip, of all trips, for several reasons: to keep watch over the expensive cargo of attractive creatures—to make certain that the minimal loss of proceeds on such endeavors was cut to nothing—to enjoy a bit of the pleasure vintage brewed by Gorgeous and its companion worlds. All work and no play—

Geordie Wentrell had heard of this trip through the scumline of the underworld at the bottom of which he now lived, and through cajoling, bribing

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(with stolen funds), blackmailing and threatening, he was able to secure berth as a wiper's toady in the hold of the *Clerkman.*

His thoughts ran simply:

A man had to do one good thing before he goes down the hole. I'll get Irvin; I'll put him away, and then I can start over. With him gone, the organization doesn't want me. I'll get him—and then the road up again.

In his secret labyrinthine heart he admired and feared Irvin. The man's bravado, his courage, his utter lack of fear no matter what the odds, were attributes Wentrell knew he lacked, and ones he desired more than the fame he had tasted, or the money he had known. He was determined to kill Irvin, as he had killed Weaver, and so establish within himself a nubbin of courage from which a strong, brave new life would emerge.

Just outside the limit barrier of the belt, the police ships called down on the *Clerkman,* and demanded an inspection.

Irvin's orders were sharp, ruthless and direct:

"Spray them out the hold port. Get rid of them . . . we can't afford to be connected with them!"

The ports irised open, and the air sucked out into the blackness of space, and with it went the bodies of the five hundred women who had been sold into slavery by the organization.

Wentrell was among the wiper's toadies who turned the valves, and he knew of the high-ranking organization officials in the sumptuous cabins abovedecks; he knew why the women were being jettisoned.

It was just one more reason for getting Irvin.

In his mind, deep where it meant something, Geordie Wentrell saw himself not as the hero and avenger he pretended to himself he was. He saw himself as a frightened man, who *had* to get Irvin for his own survival, and who feared even more deeply that he would fail.

For Irvin was strength and he was weakness.

He climbed one of the hold-ladders that ran through the air conditioning tubes, and found himself knee-and-elbow crawling through a conduit that ran to a duct in the cabin that was Irvin's.

While the *Clerkman* was being boarded and searched—while the police found nothing in the hold—while they tried to establish what the flotsam was that sped away from the

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liner, toward the sun—Wentrell worked on the fastenings of the conduit faceplate.

As it slipped free and clattered to the deck—silently, for the deck was covered by a two inch pile rug—he heard the clang of the entryports slamming, and knew the police had left. In space, a crime is committed when contraband is found *in* the ship, not *around* the ship. The police had no case, and so had departed.

Wentrell dropped from the conduit, and stared about him. The cabin was empty. He knew approximately where he was for the conduits had had directional markings inside them; he was on Alfa deck, fairly near the control compartment.

He opened the door and peered down the corridor. Sounds of voices came to him down the metal tube and he knew someone was in control with the Captain.

The stinger came out of his shirt easily. He held it steadily, and hugged the wall as he paced toward the compartment.

The door was partially open, and he looked through the slit. Irvin stood dark-eyed and imperturbable beside the Captain.

They were discussing the narrow escape.

Wentrell slid against the door and it rolled open completely. He stepped in, and both men within raised their eyes to catch first the deadly needle-muzzle of the stinger and then the eyes of the pale man who held the weapon.

"What is this—?" the Captain started.

"No move, Captain," Wentrell cautioned. "No move. It shoots."

Irvin smiled thinly. Recognition had penetrated, even after a year, even after the degradation Wentrell had known and the soft-living Irvin had known. "Good to see you again, pilot," Irvin smirked.

"You tried hard enough to find me."

"Uh-huh. Now you're here. Saves me trouble, too."

Wentrell motioned the Captain away from Irvin, and rapped out smartly, "Captain, you will hustle the ship's complement into suits, and jettison yourselves. The police cruisers are still near enough to pick you up without danger."

"You're insane!" the Captain snarled.

"No, you're wrong. But I'd rather have you all get away and not be a party to this,

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than have to kill you. Now you offer me no choice. Take your pick before I hit ten, or I'll have to choose for you—and the rest."

He started to count.

The moments wore past, and with each numeral the Captain's mood changed. First disbelief, then rage, then horror, and finally bewilderment and resignation.

It was apparent at once that the pale man meant what he said. He left the room, and went to suit-up his men. Wentrell triple-locked the door behind him. Then he turned to Irvin, with hate a festering thing within him.

"It's been a bad year for me," he said.

Irvin nodded, seemingly unconcerned. "So it seems. You stink of wiper solution, Wentrell. And other things."

"I have you to thank," the pale man retorted.

"So true," Irvin conceded, smugly. "And you're going to get it full now."

Wentrell shook his head. "Not so. I got on this ship just to take care of you, big man, and I'm going to do it right."

He saw the red light on the control boards light up as the airlocks were opened to space, and knew the Captain was on his way out with the men. It had been Irvin's ship, and when the owner had made no attempt to stop Wentrell from driving the officer off-ship, he had gone reluctantly, but as though he had been commanded. Irvin, not wanting his part in Weaver's murder known to the Captain, had allowed Wentrell his way. There was always time to get the men back aboard. Now, he made his move on the pilot.

He stepped sidewise, and slapped at the stinger.

Wentrell went back, and let a blast go. It missed the dark-eyed man, and severed a stanchion holding up the comp-racks. The huge racks teetered, and snapped their braces, as the two men watched. Before they could stop it, the comp-board had crashed on them—and they lay there stunned, while the ship, now severed from its course, plunged off into space.

The stinger lay far out of reach, and both men were pinned in precisely the same way. The board had fallen directly across their thighs, crushing their legs. There was no way to get loose.

As the ship plummeted off-course...

The sun grew quite large in the viewscreen.

Then it was that Geordie Wentrell learned the differ-

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ence. For as they lay there, and the ship revolved and fell away from the asteroid belt, and made steadily for the burning ball of fire in space, Irvin began to cry. Softly at first, with the pain, and then more loudly with an inner pain.

"I don't want to. I don't want to. Not now, I just got what I wanted. Not now—"

Geordie Wentrell lay there beside the man he had come to kill, knowing he had set his trap too well; that it had caught him as well. But he didn't really mind. Because in a crazy, completely cockeyed way he had realized all men were like him.

All men were cowards. Some inside, like Irvin, some outside like himself, and there was no one to blame *but* himself for what had happened. If he had not been weak he would not have been bribed by Weaver; if he had not been weaker still, he would not have killed Weaver; if he had not been drowning in his own cowardice, and need to cover it, he would not have set the furnace of his hatred to burning, tracking down Irvin, and doing this.

He was at peace within himself, finally. He had admitted it to himself, and in so doing, had cleansed his soul in the right way. He was still afraid; afraid of dying and afraid even more of living. But he knew himself for what he was. He was able to say to himself, *I'm yellow*, and have it mean something complete.

It did not soothe him, it did not comfort him in those last hours as the *Clerkman* went sunwards, but it was a true thing, a real thing, and he could live with it for as long as he had left to live.

He would die, and he would die afraid. Just as Irvin would. But the difference was that now he knew himself for what he was.

The world was not to blame.

Geordie Wentrell was to blame for Geordie Wentrell.

He settled back against the deck, his cheek pressed to the coolness there, as beside him Irvin cried and moaned away his last hours of life.

While the ship *Clerkman* plunged toward that final, most brilliant, most cleansing and illuminating greatest furnace of all.

THE END

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(Continued from page 92)

struggled fiercely against him, but he was very strong. She managed to tilt her head back —and screamed.

Lucky let her go at once, and slapped her face very hard with his open hand. She staggered back and tripped over something and fell heavily. The cab driver appeared on the porch, but Lucky motioned him back inside.

"There's no one else around," he said, "as far as I know. But don't you ever try that again. Don't you see I have nothing to lose? Aren't you convinced by now. I could try to make love to you because I have nothing to lose—but I could also kill you for the same reason. Be sensible, will you? Which would you rather I did?"

Jeanne-Marie stood up. For a moment her feet felt as if they might buckle under her, but presently her strength returned. "Neither," she said, walking toward the cabin again. "And if you try that any more, I'm going to start hollering again. If you want to kill me, go ahead and kill me."

In spite of her best efforts to control it, her voice caught on the last words. Lucky laughed softly but harshly, and followed her into the cabin.

She ate without knowing what the food was. Her mind was a blank slate now. Impressions came and made tracks on it like chalk on a blackboard, but they were immediately erased. She couldn't concentrate at all. It was a state not far from hysteria, she knew. Lucky meant everything he said . . . Lucky, yes—Lucky . . . It was so hard to concentrate. Lucky might try to kill her or might try to make love to her or might try . . .

". . . clean up and make it snappy," Lucky told the driver.

"What's your hurry? Going someplace?"

"When I'm in the mood for wisecracks, I'll crack them. Just clean up in a hurry, that's all."

The driver did so, while Lucky sat smoking a cigarette. The cabin's single all-purpose room was lit by a kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling on a big hook and casting uneven shadows as the wind came through the open windows and stirred it. Jeanne-Marie felt herself dropping off to sleep and her time to register amazement. She should have been horri-

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fied, afraid for her life, beyond the point where sleep was possible. Mary-Jean surely would have been.

Yes, she thought dreamily, Mary-Jean would have been. Which was one lesson she learned from Jeanne-Marie at least. Useless fretting had always been part of Mary-Jean's make-up. But then, it was not owned exclusively by Mary-Jean: useless fretting probably took more energy from more housewives. . . .

She awoke with a start. She felt instantly refreshed. Somehow, she had known she would. In that way, the beautiful Jeanne-Marie had a certain animal-like quality about her. Sleep—and a quickening of the self. She felt alert and capable, almost as if she had been dosed with benzedrine.

She heard a noise outside and went silently to the window. Lucky was on the porch. He had found some rope and was tying the cab driver there. Lucky—with a psychopath's mind. Not insane, of course. An insane person was badly oriented. Lucky knew what he was doing—but he didn't care about the consequences, as they affected other people. A psychopath. A fugitive murderer psychopath with absolutely nothing to lose whether he tried to make love to her or decided to kill her. . . .

Adventure, Jeanne-Marie thought. This was adventure, all right. This was what she had overlooked.

In adventure — always — was the element of danger. It was part of the definition of adventure. And a housewife —a mother with responsibility—had no busines craving adventure.

No business?

Well, maybe once. Once only—to cure her. Or once, to keep with her all her life through the dull times and the humdrum days. Provided, Jeanne-Marie thought with a strange little smile, she lived through it.

"I see you're awake," Lucky said, coming inside the cabin. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing you would understand. Why did you tie him out there, Lucky?"

"Why do you think? Do we have to talk about it?"

"Not if you don't want to, I guess."

"I found something to drink," Lucky told her. "Want some?"

She shook her head and Lucky poured just one drink. He downed it in a gulp and Jeanne-Marie told him, "Keep drinking like that and you're going to get drunk."

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He poured and drank another. "Don't I know it, baby. But they won't have any liquor where they want to send me, either. A man gets to appreciate—sure you don't want some?"

"I'm positive, thank you." He's very matter-of-fact about it, Jeanne-Marie thought. He's as matter-of-fact about enjoying his liquor now as he is about killing me if I try to get away or about making love to me if I stay here.

She looked at him. Lucky's altered behavior had not changed the fact that Lucky was an attractive hunk of man. And that's what she was here for, wasn't it? Romantic adventure. If in choosing the easy way out, she also satisfied a lifelong whim too . . . What am I thinking about? she asked herself. It would satisfy him now and maybe afterwards, with the drink and everything, he'd even go to sleep and I'll be able to run somewhere for help. And anyway, it isn't me. It isn't my body. It isn't Mary-Jean. It's Jeanne-Marie. But there's no such person as Jeanne-Marie. Tomorrow, when I see the peddler at precisely four-fifteen back home . . .

If I see him, she thought wildly. Because I'm a prisoner now.

She looked again at Lucky, who was drinking steadily now. Drinking hard. Drinking so he could forget the fact that it would be all but a physical assault if he got what he wanted.

It's not Mary-Jean, it's Jeanne-Marie, she told herself again. But that didn't matter. All at once she knew it didn't matter at all. She would feel unclean all the rest of her life and she could never say an honest word of endearment again as long as she lived to her Tom, even if it did help her to escape. She shuddered at the thought.

"Come here," Lucky said. "Getting late now, so come here." His voice was thick and he took great care to enunciate each word distinctly.

Jeanne-Marie got up slowly and went across the room to him. He got to his feet unsteadily, preparing to meet her halfway. He walked an exaggerated straight line, as if to prove how sober he was. "Come here," he said again, more thickly this time.

She let him take her in his arms. She let him kiss her lips and her throat. That much, to allay his suspicions — and more. That much so she could apparently return his caresses while he surrendered drunk-

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enly to the heat of the moment, while she . . .

Clutched at him wildly with her hands until he was used to the rather unexpected sensation of her clutching hands—then, still clutching but quite coldly and efficiently, searched his pocket for the cab-driver's ignition key.

She found it and she said, breathlessly, "Lucky. I think I'll take that drink now, Lucky."

He nodded, poured it and poured one for himself. "A toast," he said, "to—"

He didn't finish. For Jeanne-Marie, smiling sweetly up at him, flung the contents of the glass in his face.

He shouted hoarsely, rubbing at his alcohol-burned eyes. He lunched around the room after her, but blinded like that it was a comparative easy manner for her to stick out her leg and trip him near the door.

As he went sprawling, she got out of there.

"I'll send help back for you!" she called to the bound taxi-driver, and sprinted across the porch and down the hill toward the cab. She got in and slammed the door and with trembling fingers tried to insert the ignition key. She finally shoved it home and heard footsteps pounding across the wood of the porch. That would be Lucky. That meant only seconds remained to her . . .

The starter ground and ground. The car wouldn't kick over.

She was still trying when Lucky reached her. At the last moment she realized that the car was on a hill. If she released the handbrake she would at least coast downhill away from him.

The car began to move as she tried the starter button again. Then the door across from her was pulled open and Lucky threw himself into the car, sprawling across the front seat toward her. At that moment, the engine kicked over and Jeanne-Marie put the car in gear.

It started with a clashing of gears, leaping forward with a surge of power. The door on Lucky's side was still open and swung back and forth. Lucky was sitting up now, reaching for her, trying to pull her away from the wheel.

They struggled while the car skidded from side to side of the road. Jeanne-Marie kept her foot on the accelerator, though, and their speed increased. The car swerved wildly and, she knew, might

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even overturn on one of the steeper turns in the country road.

It swerved again, rocking. It went up on two wheels, the tired screaming. Now the open door banged and grated against asphalt. Lucky had a strong grip on her shoulder and his face was very close to her own and she told him, "You'll kill us, you fool!"

"You think I care? You care, baby. I don't—"

She felt her fingers being pulled inexorably from the steering wheel. If she lost her hold, the car, doing fifty now, would be entirely out of control.

The car swerved again, went up on two wheels, lurching. Her right elbow was suddenly free and she jabbed with it, hitting something. The car lurched again, as if deciding whether to right itself or go over on its side.

And Lucky, arms and legs flailing, went out the open door.

Jeanne-Marie braked the car quickly. She could see him in the rear-view mirror, a dark shadow on the surface of the road, not moving. She stopped the car and used its two-way radio to call the cab company. Then, making sure that the still form of the man on the road was not moving now, she allowed herself an unexpected feminine reaction.

She fainted.

It was two o'clock the next afternoon. Rural sheriff's station, full of city police now.

And Lucky: real name George Carmine, a prisoner.

And confused police.

"But, miss. You caught him for us. The reward is yours. Don't you want the reward?"

"No, please. Not if I'll have to identify myself."

Afraid you will. There's no identification on her, Captain. Can you tie it? I can't tie it, said the captain. No one could tie it.

We have the whole story, miss. All but you. Who you are, how you happened to find him. Fingerprints don't match any in Washington, miss. We've already checked. You won't tell us your name. Description doesn't match any missing persons. Have a heart, miss."

"I haven't done anything, have I?"

No, she hadn't done anything.

"Then just let me go. Please?" She had to hurry. Driving fast, she could just make it back home in time for the peddler. She had to make it. If she did not, the peddler would assume she wanted the

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adventure-procuring face and body of Jeanne-Marie all her life. . . .

We'll have to insist on your name and address. We'll have to insist on a routine investigation of you, to close out the case, you understand.

"Really, I'll have to be going."

We'll have to insist . . . Just go with the matron. Wait back there with the matron. Perhaps (hopefully) you'll talk to the matron?

She would not talk to the matron. But she would go with the matron if they wanted her to.

The cabbie was just going outside. She said good-bye. He said good-bye. He said he was very grateful. He had said almost nothing but that for hours. Lucky, who had a broken collar bone, said nothing.

They passed a street door. After Lucky, it would be easy. Anything would be easy. She shoved the matron. She opened the door and went outside and slammed the door and ran.

"Holy Mae," the cabbie said, getting into his car.

"Show me how grateful you are?"

"I can't—"

"Just to the city line and a subway station. Please? But you've got to hurry. . . ."

He uttered an understandable curse and let her in and they sped away before the matron could come outside and see in which direction her charge had disappeared. . . .

At precisely four-fifteen, the cab turned into her block. The driver had changed his mind, had taken her all the way there. She was about to point out her house—knowing she could never be checked there because instead of Jeanne-Marie the police would find, praise be, plain Mary-Jean — when suddenly she spotted him on the street.

Rotund little man, long nose, enormous bag. The peddler. "Stop here," she said. The driver needed no coaxing.

"I was grateful," he said. "But we're even now, lady. There won't be any charge." And away he went.

"Hello, there," she said.

"Hello," said the peddler.

"I made up my mind."

"Naturally."

"What did you say?"

"Naturally, my dear lady. They always do. You've decided you'd had enough of adventure, right?"

"Well—y-yes."

"Always do. All right."

"Don't you have to do anything to change me back?"

"Nope. They always do. It

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wears off, you see. Besides, the memory of it keeps them happy, sort of. Or content. I don't know. Never was a housewife. Well, good-bye, dear lady. Got a job down the block."

"Right down *this* block?"

"Someone you know? Of course, it's someone you know. You'd be surprised how many housewives we Happiness Salesmen do visit. They keep it secret, of course, like you'll keep it secret."

And the peddler walked off with his enormous bag.

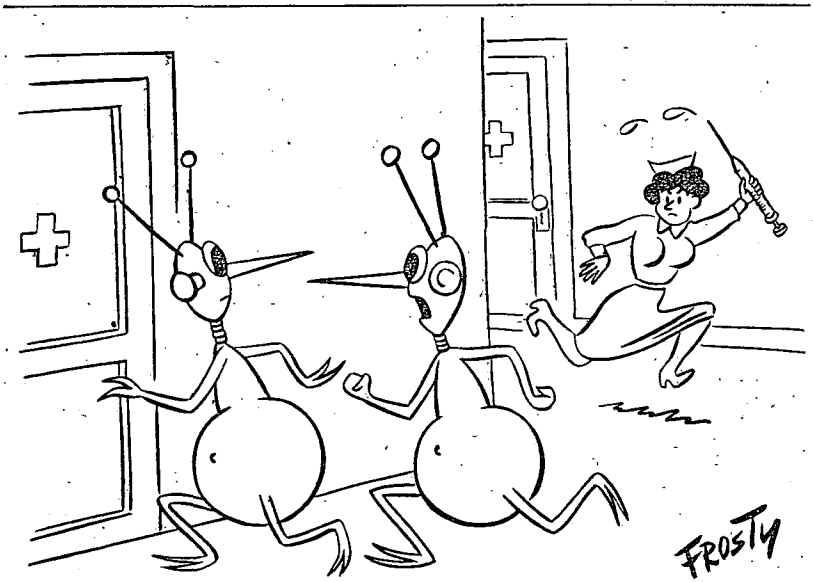
Jeanne-Marie watched him for a while. While she was watching him, she became Mary-Jean. She could feel it. The electric tingling was gone from her skin. The ravishingly beautiful face and the million-dollar figure were gone.

She went toward the front door of her house. She was just plain Mary-Jean now. She liked it suddenly. She never thought she would like it.

Mary-Jean suddenly knew, without knowing how she knew, that sooner or later the Happiness Salesman visited almost every housewife there ever was.

Somehow, the thought of it made her feel very good.

THE END



"I keep telling her there's an easier way to do it on Mars."

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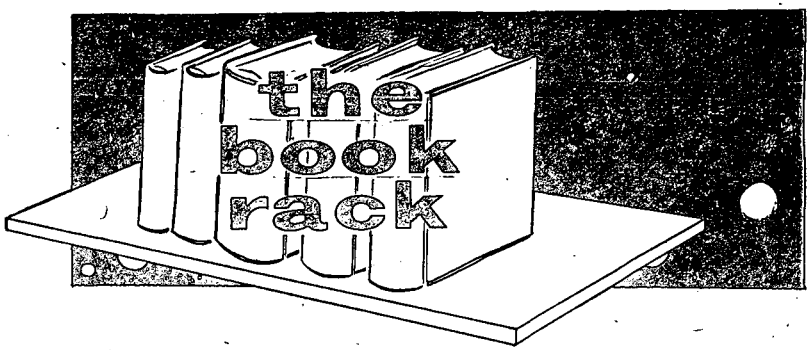

BY S. E. COTTS

EMPIRE OF THE ATOM. *By A. E. Van Vogt. 162 pp. Ace Books. Paper: 35¢.*

This is a fine Van Vogt which is high praise indeed. He is always worth reading, but sometimes the originality of his thinking takes on a complexity which obscures his material. Happily this is not the case in *Empire of the Atom.* Here he uses his imagination wisely, enhancing what he sets out to do instead of erecting a barrier between reader and book.

The story concerns the Linns, ruling family of Earth, 12,000 years after the Galactic War. At the beginning of the book, a new heir has been born. To the horror of the family he is a freak, with twisted limbs and should have been destroyed, for this was the rule of the times. However, his mother saves him for she can foresee the day when he might prove her devoted and trustworthy slave, when her other children would be fighting each for his own share of power. She does not count on the fact that the freak, Clane, may be as unusual mentally as he is physically. But such turns out to be the case. His alert mind and questioning spirit have an explosive effect on a people who no longer know or understand the elementary principles of science, though they possess the power of the atom.

Van Vogt has given us an immensely readable novel of a strange personality, Clane, who has it in his power either to remold his world on a higher level, or reduce it again to barbarism.

SF '57: THE YEAR'S GREATEST SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY. *Edited by Judith Merril. 320 pp. The Gnome Press, Inc. $3.95.*

Here's good news for those who are about to take their first plunge into science fiction as well as those addicts who can't get

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enough—Judy Merril is back again and things are well in hand. The list of authors in her new anthology reads like a *Who's who in SF*. Among the notables are Algis Budrys, Isaac Asimov, C. M. Kornbluth, Theodore Sturgeon, and Zenna Henderson.

One could rest well content by just reading such an excellent volume of stories, but in addition, this book offers so many other features. The layout and printing are a joy to behold (unlike a great many SF books); then there is Miss Merril's succinct and telling introduction to each author at the heads of their respective stories; at the back there is an honorable mention listing of other fine stories of the year along with the magazines they appeared in so that the interested reader can delve further. Also at the back is a sort of summary by Miss Merril on how she discovers the shape of a book as she starts to weed out material for her collections. Fans who are interested in getting more than simple reading pleasure from their time would be wise to read her statement first. For though they may disagree with her about what the particular shape of these stories may be, their imaginations will go traveling down the paths she has indicated and they will inadvertently supply each story with a broader frame of reference.

TWICE IN TIME. *By Manly Wade Wellman. 222 pp. Avalon Books. $2.75.*

This is an unusual book—one that is very difficult to put down before the end. It is a science fiction novel to be sure, but the bulk of the book takes place in the Renaissance Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent in the latter part of the Fifteenth Century.

Leo Thrasher, the hero, is a Twentieth Century young man whose favorite period of history was the Italian Renaissance. He is well versed in both science and art and has built a time reflector to take him back to that period. While he is in the past he plans to paint a mural to show that he has really been there. He realizes that he can transfer only himself, not his apparatus, which means that once he gets back in history he will have to build a second time reflector to bring him back to the present. Trouble occurs as soon as he has gone back to the Fifteenth Century; he finds that his memory of art and language and history was as it always had been, but his grasp of science has grown too hazy to build a second time reflector. In addition to this, he falls into the hands of a gifted but evil alchemist, who uses hypnotism to get at some of Thrasher's forgotten knowledge and turn it to his own ends.

The interplay of the two threads: life in Fifteenth Century Florence and Thrasher's effect on it, provide a most unusual and highly recommended reading experience.

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(Continued from page 5)

What about direction? Suppose our capabilities which call these directions "up" and "down" give us only a warped concept of space and that up and down are not opposite directions at all but merely *(e.g.)* a traverse of a continuous "true" space curve? Or, suppose that true space is warped in a way not yet described which has another dimension between up and down? What of the relation of motion between this "moving" piston and ourselves? Could we have a true motion in space such that the piston merely appears to move and is actually at one or more positions of rest?

Is the concept of line which predicates your answer unquestionably valid?

Robert V. Beltz, M.D.
312 W. Washington
Montpelier, Ohio

● *A surprising number of arguments, pro and con, came in on this problem, but time and space prohibited their presentation in this issue. Steven Steckler, a student at New York University proved the "stop" contention via the calculus route. His solution will appear next month.*

Dear Ed:

I'd like to commend Harlan Ellison for his efforts to set me on the straight and narrow, but he did not have to expound on the inside facts of the publishing field. I may not know everything there is to know about publishing even though I do work for a firm that owns two newspapers, an AM and FM radio station, and a color printing plant, but I am familiar with many of the points you—Ellison—elaborated on. Yes, I agree, editors do not materially sit behind solid gold desks, but many use their position to a point where they are virtually kings. However, from what I have learned from you, others, myself and editors themselves, I feel that science fiction editors would have to be excluded from this category. Some s-f editors may be editorially prejudiced, but I haven't met any yet. In fact, most I have encountered—by mail—seem very helpful. I have submitted material to s-f magazines; it was rejected. I rewrote and submitted again; it too was rejected, but I have received comments that my writing is improving. I am still writing, and I write for the love of it, not to acquire money. I admit I'd like money for my efforts but it seems I am not yet good enough. Until I am good enough I will continue to write whenever the urge strikes instead of forcing a plot upon need of money.

The point of discussion is not whether I write worth a hoot or not,

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but the fact I suggested the possibility of publishing a magazine to aid science fiction writers on the up and coming. This suggestion was submitted in the form of a question almost a full year ago in the full view of the financial sacrifices that would have to be made in order to bring it about. The question was asked in order to determine said project's feasibility. Since the magazines I used as examples of the Company's ability have either suspended publication or have been delayed for months the idea now seems to be impractical. This is what I wanted to find out. The idea still seems to be kicking around among the readers, the fans, and several pro-writers. Well, with all the discussion, some conclusion should not be hard to reach. The conclusion will satisfy me. And if the conclusion does not satisfy you, Mr. Ellison, then do not be dismayed; we can't all be satisfied. Perhaps the chips will be against me, but I won't hang my head in shame. I'll admit defeat and try to improve myself. Recalling your words: ". . . We're all trying the best we can all the time. When we fall short . . . well, we're sorry. We'll do better next time."

H. R. Frye
408 Alleghany Rd.
Hampton, Virginia

● *Well said, Mr. Frye. Only one point strikes me. You avow that you will write when the urge strikes you and not force a plot for money. This is a rather casual approach and possibly you will never achieve more than a casual result. There is nothing wrong with money. If you could convince yourself that you needed some very badly you might find yourself writing an acceptable story much quicker.*

Dear Editor:

Well, what do you know, you guys don't actually write your own letter column! I was really surprised to see my letter in print. However, something is distressing me. The major part of my letter was left out in the printing and some fancy language was added to my words to make me seem more intelligent. How come?

As for your November issue, I think it was far better than ever. I especially enjoyed the story "The Wife Factory." It is the kind of story that is found in *Dream World,* which by the way, I would like to see published more often by your publishing company.

Mike Ungerman
20 Ross Court
Londonville, N. Y.

● *Why, Mike! How you talk! You know darn well your letter couldn't have been improved a bit.*

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Dear Editor:

In answer to Harlan Ellison's letter, I would say that he's absolutely right. Young writers must be good or quit. When I see Heinlein's name on a story I figure the yarn will be a good one. If I see Joe Doaks' name on a story in the same magazine I guess it will be good, too. If it isn't and if poor yarns keep coming consistently I will soon stop buying the magazine.

I, and most other readers, buy a science fiction magazine in order to read good s-f and for no other reason. If a Heinlein story is there it will be good. If Doaks' story isn't good the magazine has no reason to print it.

A magazine would be foolish (indeed, would have no excuse) not to obtain the best material available no matter who writes it.

If Doaks can't meet the competition of the top authors in the field then he should quit. If he can—fine. We have a good new writer in the field.

A. Stephen Peiker
233 Palmer Hill Rd.
Old Greenwich, Conn.

Correct, Mr. Peiker. Good new writers are coming into the science-fiction field every day.

Dear Editor:

You'd better watch that E. K. Jarvis. He (she? it?) has a potential Johnny Mayhem in that character Barney Idalla of "The Moon Stealers," October, *Fantastic*. "A World Called Vicious" and "The Barbarian" were passable, but I would not mark them down for rereading in the future. Too many dream stories with flashbacks and harsh treatment of aliens on first contact have been appearing lately to let these two stand out. "The Ugly Beauty" brings up a twist that I have never seen handled quite so well. In fact, I cannot recall any story that has used this ugliness-to-you is beauty-to-me idea as its main theme. The old invasion by outer-space aliens in "Operation Graveyard" was better than a lot of invasion stories I have read. Let's have more from Mr. Jorgensen. "March of the Yellow Death" was just a little *too* fantastic for me to take. The instantaneous evolution of all mankind is just too much to swallow on top of self-propagating substance like that yellow mush.

Many thanks to Harlan Ellison for his attempt to have readers put a little thought into their letters instead of criticizing on the slightest provocation. I, too, have seen many letters written in haste that would never have been written if the author of such a letter had stopped to think.

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Leigh Marlowe gives us a nice little discussion on weather, but doesn't say much more than we discuss during our morning coffee break at the office. How about a science feature like Willy Ley's articles in *Astounding*, without the few bottom of the barrel scrapings like his recent two-part serial on the disappearance of the Dodo bird? I'm not asking for any disclosure of military secrets but perhaps you could get some up-to-the-minute information from Dr. Oberth or Werner von Braun.

Keep these Frosty cartoons coming and let's have more of "It Sounds Fantastic But . . ." as a comedy relief. By the way, those Canadian Laws may sound looney but have you examined some of the screwy legal technicalities of your own Hew Hess Hay? (to borrow from Al Capp).

Alan Fogal
810 Algonquin Avenue
North Bay, Ontario, Canada

● *I think if you'll check you'll find that Mr. Ley writes for Horace Gold's* Galaxy, *not for* Astounding.

(Continued from page 3)

ers of the Format—and maybe that's why television is doing so well these days.

So henceforth *Fantastic's* format will be a structure with elastic boundaries. This does not mean we will go off on any experimental tangents. It doesn't mean we will become a western book, though a story in a western setting may appear now and again. We will not become a mystery or suspense magazine but stories in these categories will by no means be barred. From now on, *Fantastic's* fiction may be laid on the far side of Neptune or in your Aunt Minnie's kitchen if our standards of excellence and entertainment value are met. And requirements in these directions will be rigid indeed.

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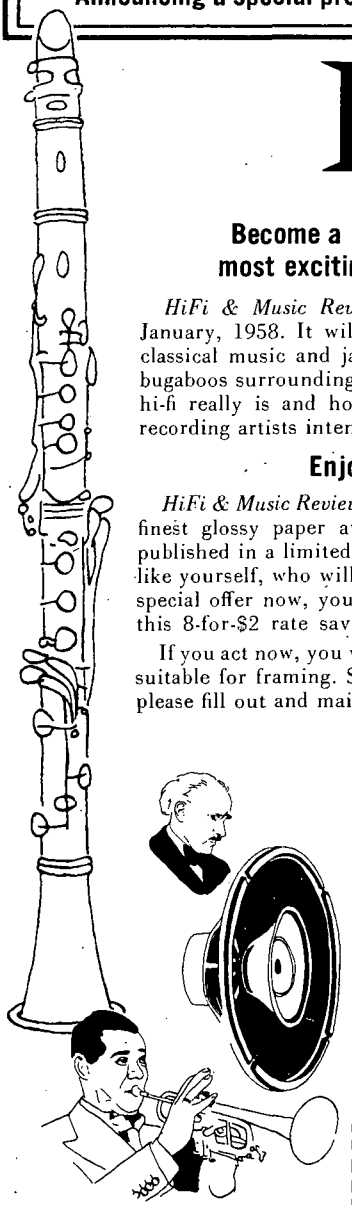

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